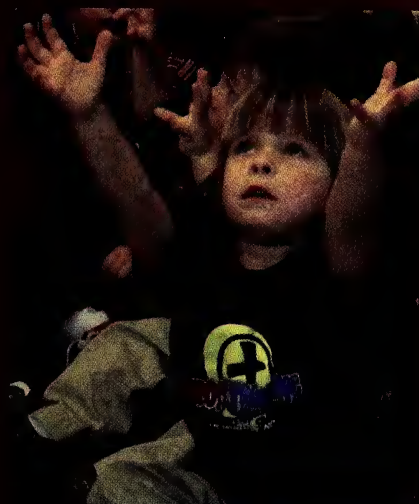


A Heritage of Hope

A History of First Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
1808-2008



James E. Everette, III

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY



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James E. Everette, III

Baptist History and Heritage Society
Atlanta, Georgia

Fields Publishing, Inc.
Nashville, Tennessee

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Introduction



In *Places of Worship: Exploring Their Future*, Dr. James Wind writes, “The congregational historian’s tasks are to ferret out all the plotlines contained within the life of a particular congregation, to select the important ones, and then to connect these filaments of story with those that stretch beyond it into the familial, denominational, social and religious histories.”¹ This will be the intent of this historian as he embarks on the journey of exploring the facts and legends of the earliest Baptists in Wilmington, North Carolina, who eventually became known as The First Baptist Church and have continued to exist in the Cape Fear region for the past 200 years. The goal for this endeavor is to assist the current congregation in grasping a better understanding of its formative roots and discovering a truer and clearer sense of its identity. Emory University professor Dr. James F. Hopewell defined identity as “...the persistent set of beliefs, values, patterns, symbols, stories, and style that makes a congregation distinctive.”² Questions to be answered include, “Who were these earliest Baptists? From where did they come? What were their guiding influences? How have they influenced the Wilmington area? What difference has First Baptist Church made in the world?”

Recognizing that chronology is the backbone of any historical blueprint, a timeline will be used as the plumb line by which to organize the story of First Baptist Church. Stories of the events surrounding Wilmington that effected the congregation will be interspersed.

Often a congregation’s character can be given decisive shape in moments of crisis. That shape may endure for generations. Such critical incidents often clarify character as they manifest central values and conflicts. First Baptist Church has not been immune to such challenges. Therefore, stories of struggle and survival for the church and its community will play an important part in this writing. Because a portion of this story will include the recollections of people, some of the events of First Baptist will be

expressed in language of probability rather than absolute certainty. First Baptist has almost one hundred members who have been a part of its current congregation for more than fifty years. They are an important part of these Baptists with a heritage of hope.

The Gothic-style sanctuary of First Baptist Church, standing at the corner of Market Street and Fifth Avenue, was built in the 1860s and quietly proclaims a part of the congregation's self-understanding. It is an indication of what the members and early First Baptist leaders valued regarding matters of community status and refinement. For too long, Baptists in the Cape Fear region were considered poor, uneducated, weak, and a people with little influence. The way this building fits into the landscape of Wilmington is indicative that this body of believers wanted to send the message that they were a congregation whose dependence was on a God who was far greater than their human accomplishments. They saw themselves as a church with a bright hope for being the conduit by which God would act to make a positive difference in the world. Their perseverance in the midst of struggle is a testimony to their confidence in the Apostle Paul's message that, "I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me."

Theoretical Stance

In the spring of 1999, First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina embarked on what many members of the congregation, including the entire ministerial staff, thought was the most ambitious capital campaign in the history of the church. The theme of the campaign was "Heritage and Hope," and the financial goal the congregation was challenged to pledge was \$1.75 million. The money would be used to erase the debt and to cover the expected renovation expense on a recently purchased building (original home of John A. Taylor that became the armory of the Wilmington Light Infantry before being renovated as the offices of the church) beside the existing sanctuary, to build a new building that would connect these two buildings, to renovate the existing education space, and to pay for several smaller projects. This money would be given over the following three years. Several meetings were held in order for members to become informed of the reasons for expanding and updating the facilities of the church. Each meeting contained a segment in which stories of the church's history were shared in order to remind members of their ecclesiastical roots and to challenge them to continue the tradition of offering hope for those who would follow. At the conclusion of every meeting, financial commitment cards were distributed to those in attendance. Each family in the

church received a commitment card to indicate the amount of money they intended to contribute to the campaign. When the cards were collected, the congregation of First Baptist Church had pledged \$2.3 million and eventually gave in excess of \$3 million.

Campaign advisors were amazed by the generosity of the congregation and the number of families who participated. They were surprised that First Baptist Church was able to raise so much money without receiving several large gifts. The campaign advisor commented that in all the campaigns he had directed, he had never seen a congregation exceed its goal like First Baptist.

When one hears the stories of First Baptist Church, it is evident that “Heritage and Hope” is more than just a campaign slogan. Like the early Hebrew people who drew strength from the reminder that the God they worshipped and depended upon for life was the same One who was the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” this newest generation of Wilmingtonians who call First Baptist Church their spiritual home tell stories, myths and legends of matriarchs and patriarchs who made decisions and sacrifices that shaped the church into what it is today. Important questions that must be asked are, “Are the stories true?” “Are all the facts of the stories told?” “What are the stories that are not told?” “Why aren’t some stories told?”

Certainly, First Baptist Church has a colorful, rich heritage filled with grand stories of great people who have helped to mold Baptist life in the Cape Fear region and across the state of North Carolina. However, the only written histories that exist are historical sketches that have been penned on the occasion of special anniversaries. A concise historical sketch was penned in 1933, on the occasion of its 125th anniversary. Additional information was added in 1958 and again in 1983, as the church celebrated its 150th and 175th anniversaries. Therefore, believing that history is vital to identity, interpretations of historical facts is what is usually written and told when reflecting on the past; the entire story cannot be told. The majority of history is written from the bias of the writer so there are times when certain events get more attention than others. Still, a concise, written history of First Baptist Church does not exist and should therefore be written as the church begins its third century.

It is important that a written history exist for those who have heard stories, but who do not know surrounding facts. Another benefit of knowing from whence we have come is that we can celebrate past accomplishments and learn from previous shortcomings so similar mistakes will not be repeated. Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. By record-

ing the history, perhaps members of First Baptist Church will be better able to tell God's story so others will be moved to make a commitment to the God who has sustained a Baptist church in Wilmington, North Carolina for two hundred years.

History cannot be strictly scientific, or strictly narrative. It is imperative that facts be separated from the bias of the recorder of the facts. The majority of information being researched will come from the minutes of church meetings. Therefore, it may be difficult to distinguish between what actually happened, or was said, and what the recorder wished had happened, or recorded. The narrator's voice will be heard by those who read this writing.

Several historians may study the same event but have differing conclusions because they look at the event through a lens of different questions. One may desire to paint the history of First Baptist Church as a masterpiece of the perfect "bride of Christ," but he must be honest with himself and his readers to tell the truth, even when it may expose blemishes. "Good historians do not preselect the evidence according to their point of view."³ In the words of E.H. Carr, "History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past."⁴ This has been the case when researching the history of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina. They are a people who have found strength in the "cloud of witnesses" who have provided broad shoulders on which those who have followed have been able to stand. It is the responsibility of this group of Baptists to continue sharing the endless message of hope that has shaped them into who they are today.

Context

As the sun rises over the Atlantic Ocean, 30 miles north of the mouth of the Cape Fear River in southeastern North Carolina, Wilmington Historian Bob Jenkins introduces himself to yet another group of tourists who desire to discover some of the history of downtown Wilmington. Bob knows more about local history than most residents in town and enjoys sharing stories of days gone by with those who join him on one of his walking tours. One of his favorite stops on the tour stands at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street, only five blocks east of the river.

The First Baptist Church is easy to spot as the tour group leaves the banks of the Cape Fear and heads up the hill of Market Street—the age-old street that has divided the north and south sides of Wilmington since its settling in 1733. Designed by Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan, the sanctuary of Wilmington's First Baptist Church was modeled after Fredericksburg Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

An example of early English Gothic architecture, First Baptist Church is characterized by pointed arches around its exterior doors and windows, and narrow slate-covered spires on either side of the front of the building. The taller spire, which points to the heavens at the corner of Fifth and Market streets rises 197 feet above the ground. Except for an eighteen-month period of reconstruction after the 135-mile-per-hour winds of Hurricane Fran blasted Wilmington in 1996, causing the steeple to crash down upon Market Street, it has been the tallest point in Wilmington since it was erected in 1860. This building has served as only the second home of Wilmington's earliest Baptist work, which began in 1808.

As tourists strain their necks staring up at the tall spire swaying in the coastal breezes that are common to the port city, Mr. Jenkins tells them of a man named John Lamb Prichard who served as pastor of First Baptist from 1856 until his untimely death in 1862. Dr. Prichard led Wilmington's first Baptist congregation to build the beautiful sanctuary and to relocate from the original, outgrown Baptist House of Worship that still sits on Baptist Hill at the corner of Front and Ann Streets, only six blocks from where First Baptist worships today.

Dr. Prichard supervised the early construction stages of the sanctuary, but did not live to see it completed, because he died from yellow fever after a blockade runner brought the fever to the port of Wilmington in August of 1862. Since that time, members of First Baptist Church have considered Dr. John Lamb Prichard to be their most famous pastor and martyr.

Once inside the historic sanctuary that today seats approximately 650 people, visitors begin to remark on its beauty. The deep burgundy carpet accents the cherry-stained heart pine wood that panels the interior of the building. The walls, the pews, the hand-carved grill work on the front of the balcony that forms a horseshoe around the sanctuary, the baptistery, choir loft and pulpit, the arches above the windows and the pulpit, the pulpit furnishings and the communion table, and even the arched ceiling that reaches a pinnacle of fifty feet above the floor are made of cherry-stained heart pine wood that was floated down the Cape Fear River from southeastern North Carolina. The curly pine pews located on the main floor of the sanctuary are beautifully hand-carved and have high backs and Gothic panels on the ends. The pews contain dividers that allow for only three people to sit in some sections and as many as eight to sit in others. Each pew is numbered. This is because rental of the pews financed the early church. Fees ranged from \$10 to \$500 annually and were based on the location and size of the pew. The renter had exclusive use of the pew for worship

services, prayer meetings, business meetings and revival meetings.

The pews in the balcony are extremely rustic. These pews sit lower than normal and have short backs and bottoms. Interestingly enough, they are the preferred seats of most who worship at First Baptist today, all of whom are Caucasian. Legend has it that these pews were originally designated for African-Americans who worshipped at First Baptist at the time of the dedication of the sanctuary. However, it is the opinion of this writer that this is strictly legend. Most African-American members chose to begin their own church and left First Baptist in the mid-1860s. These African-Americans constructed their sanctuary at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Campbell Street, five blocks north of Market Street, shortly after the Civil War ended. This congregation calls itself, "First Baptist Missionary Church." It was the first of eleven churches that were started by First Baptist.

There are five large, arched, colored-glass windows on both the east and west sides of the sanctuary. This writer does not think they are particularly inviting to behold. They do not seem to match each other and do not tell a story, and the colors of glass are not pleasing to the eye. However, the large, lighted, circular window above the baptistery is quite captivating. The twenty-six pie-shaped pieces of glass form a picture of Jesus lounging with his twelve disciples at the table of their last supper together. The hues of red, burgundy, blue, brown, cream, and gold quickly catch every visitor's eyes as soon as the window is lighted. The beauty of this new Baptist house of worship must have brought tears to the eyes of the 244 people (mostly women and children) who made up the Church membership when the sanctuary was dedicated to God on May 1, 1870.

Music has always been an important aspect of the ministry of First Baptist Church. A central part of the sanctuary furnishings is the pipe organ. Initially installed in 1890, it was one of the first in eastern North Carolina and considered one of the finest musical instruments in the state. After a renovation to the sanctuary in 1992, the organ was moved from the loft above the pulpit to the choir platform area directly behind the pulpit. The organ has four keyboards and more than 2,800 pipes ranging in size from that of a pencil to 32 feet in length. The large pipes are visible to worshippers. They surround the baptistery located above the choir loft. The organ is played during most worship services held in the sanctuary.

As Mr. Jenkins tells stories about Wilmington's earliest Baptists, some of the visitors begin to read copies of the Order of Service from last Sunday's worship service and others notice copies of Kingdom News, the weekly newsletter of First Baptist Church. Tourists notice there are two services of

worship each Sunday morning. “The Journey” service offers a more interactive innovative worship experience. It is held in the sanctuary at 9:00 a.m. This service is for those who prefer contemporary praise music led by a band of musicians rather than hymns sung to the beauty of the pipe organ. The 11:00 a.m. service is traditional, with acolytes lighting altar candles, a call to silence, chiming of the hour, spoken calls to worship, responsive readings, the Lord’s prayer, singing of the Gloria Patri and offerings of classical “high church” music accompanying the sermon. The worship leaders wear robes and hymns are unannounced. Some people describe this worship service as “formal” while others say it is “dignified.” Most worshippers say they were warmly greeted and the hours of worship are inspirational and meaningful for them. Members like to say that each worship service is authentically First Baptist.

The Kingdom News lists the many ministries and activities in which the congregation is involved in. One of the first things tourists may be surprised to read is that the average weekly worship attendance is 825, an increase of more than three hundred in the last ten years. This is unusual for most historic, downtown churches, especially when considering the fact that First Baptist only has thirty off-street parking spaces. Most of these are reserved as “Handicapped Parking.” What may be even more surprising is that First Baptist Church has added over 125 new members each year for the past fifteen years and had eight members enter vocational ministry during that time. The annual budget is \$2 million. The congregation has over-given the budget each of the last twelve years while also giving more than ten million dollars to capital expenditures. Readers also notice that First Baptist Church gives almost 20 percent of its offerings to mission causes.

A perusal of the newsletter shows financial support and hours of mission service is given to local agencies like the Mercy House overnight shelter, St. James overnight shelter, Good Shepherd Ministries, Gospel Rescue Mission, Habitat for Humanity, Yahweh Center, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard, the Food Bank, Hospice, Domestic Violence Shelter, the Carousel Center, feeding area street people, and the Wilmington Baptist Association. First Baptist has also served as the area collection center for Operation Christmas Child shoe box gifts. In addition to these local ministries, First Baptist has taken part in an outreach ministry to the New Hanover County Jail. There is at least one annual church-wide mission trip to cities within the United States and around the world. The congregation has continued in the steps of its founders by performing mission work across the street and around the world.

While sitting in the sanctuary (from the spring of 2002 until the fall of 2003), Mr. Jenkins' tour group would have smelled the aroma of a hot, nutritious meal being prepared for the 180 hungry and homeless people who ate lunch in the First Baptist fellowship hall every Monday thru Friday. A team of volunteers gave up one morning each week and met in the kitchen to cook and serve hot meals to "the least of these" in the name of Christ. Some of these hungry people were invited to eat by members of the congregation who lead Bible studies and prayer meetings in the New Hanover County jail while others were people First Baptist members met while serving as hosts at local overnight shelters. Either way, the word on the street in Wilmington is that First Baptist Church is a group of caring Christians on mission.

The Christian Education page of the Kingdom News indicates the importance of Sunday School ministry, small group ministries for men, women and teenagers, and the various discipleship seminars that are offered on Wednesday nights during the fall and winter months. The Youth column lists the many activities that take place during Youth Group on Sunday evenings and the mid-week offerings for teenagers who are interested in music, drama, small group Bible study and mission adventures. Additionally, there are retreats for in-depth spiritual growth and mission trips for middle school, high school and college students.

First Baptist took mission teams to Guatemala and Colorado in 2007. A team of eighty-five teenagers and adults gave ten days of their summer providing disaster relief for residents along the Alabama and Mississippi coasts in 2006 after Hurricane Katrina came ashore in the fall of 2005. One hundred four members reached out to people living in the mountains of Jamaica in 2001 for a ten-day music and mission trip in which the Youth Choir sang in area churches at night and performed the grunt-work of building a new worship center during the day. Utah was the destination for two teams of missionaries that spent three weeks building a Baptist Conference Center during the summer of 2000. First Baptist is blessed with a Youth Ministry that includes over 200 teenagers.

The Children's Corner of the Kingdom News has an invitation for the congregation to attend an upcoming musical presented by the first-through sixth-grade choirs, an open house for the weekday pre-school that began in 2007, a note about a change in the schedule of the Mother's Morning Out Ministry, a note about "Parenting in the Pew," an

encouragement for the 4th-6th graders to participate in the Sunday afternoon Bible Drill ministry, and an announcement about the sock collection for the homeless that the children are leading. From the cradle to middle school, First Baptist has a desire to see their children grow in stature and spirit.

“The Heartbeat” (the monthly newsletter detailing the Recreation Ministry) lists winners of last week’s basketball league championship, volleyball league results, information about the spring golf and tennis tournaments, and an article indicating ways you can lose those extra pounds that were gained over the holidays. There is also an announcement about a trip to Europe that is scheduled for the fall. Most of the Recreation Ministry is conducted at the First Baptist Church Activities Center located four miles from downtown. Built better than 30 years ago on an eight-acre tract of land that was purchased for future speculation, the Activities Center is centrally located directly behind Wilmington’s primary shopping mall.

With a gymnasium, softball field, locker rooms, game room, book store, kitchen, designated space for children and teenagers and meeting rooms; First Baptist has used this facility to enrich the lives of its members and serve as an outreach arm to the community. It is used for committee meetings, banquets, overnight shelter for mission teams, and community meetings for support groups, a pre-school, and activities for children, teenagers, and adults of all ages, scout troops, and church wide gatherings. From 2001–2004, the gymnasium served as the worship center for another church that was burned out of their building.

When the tourists look on the back of the Kingdom News they find a list of the ministerial and support staff. First Baptist has seven ordained, male clergy; one ordained female clergy, two male full-time program staff members; two female full-time program staff members; five female part-time program staff members and seven members of the support staff. While this may seem to be a large staff, each person has plenty to do as they minister to a congregation of over 2,200 members, 1,500 of whom live in the Wilmington area. In addition to the pastors, First Baptist has a team of fifty-six deacons who serve the congregation. Fifteen of the current members of the ordained diaconate are women.

As the tour through the church nears its end, the pastor of twenty-two years enters the sanctuary. Accompanying him is the rest of the ministerial staff—the Youth Minister who has been on staff for thirty years, the Minister of Music who has planned and directed the worship services for the

past sixteen years, the woman who has served as the Minister of Spiritual Formation since 2001, and the man who has served as Associate Pastor for the last eighteen years. When asked to describe the congregation they serve, this team of ministers agrees that First Baptist is a church that lives by its mission statement of “becoming, and helping others become, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”

When asked about the demographics of the membership, the ministers tell of their oldest female member who is 98 years old, and the man who has been a member for more than 80 years. They tell the visitors about the 90 members who have been part of First Baptist for better than 50 years and the 900 who are between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-five. They describe the average member as 40 years of age, with a college degree, and as being a white collared professional. The majority of members have an above average income. Most members are interested in and involved in community service, though most did not grow up in Wilmington. A number of the members are politically active with a healthy split of conservative Democrats and compassionate Republicans. The majority of female members are employed outside of their homes. Most members drive at least five miles and pass a dozen other churches to worship with First Baptist Church. This description makes First Baptist look very much like the city in which it is situated.

Wilmington, North Carolina has a population of 93,000 people with the majority being between the ages of 25 and 55. It is a close-knit community—literally—in that the area of Wilmington is only 54 square miles and located in the smallest county in the state. The median age of a citizen is 34 years. The annual median family income is \$40,200 and 54 percent of the citizens have college experience. Thirty-one percent have earned a bachelor’s degree. This is not surprising in that Wilmington is home to Cape Fear Community College, with an enrollment of more than 6,000 students in its college-preparation program and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, which boasts a student population of 11,000. The average home in New Hanover County, of which Wilmington is the county seat, costs \$156,000. The cost of living has increased dramatically since the opening of Interstate 40 connected Wilmington to the rest of North Carolina in 1990. The population of New Hanover County has increased by 33 percent over the past fifteen years.

Wilmington is fortunate to have a strong employment base with the presence of large employers such as General Electric, Corning, Veri-

zon, Progress Energy, Pharmaceutical Product Development, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, New Hanover Regional Medical Network and film production studios nearby. The category in which First Baptist Church and the demographics of Wilmington contrast is the area of racial makeup. While 80 percent of the population of Wilmington is white and 17 percent are African-Americans, First Baptist currently has no African-American members.

One of the members of the tour asks, “Is this a Southern Baptist Church?” The team of ministers quickly responds by saying, “Yes and no.” We are a Baptist church that is located in the south, but we are not affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.” First Baptist was represented at the initial meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Augusta, Georgia in 1845, and even hosted the annual meeting of the Convention in 1897. However, after twenty years of being frustrated by actions of the Convention, First Baptist Church voted to “officially” sever ties with the SBC and removed the words “Southern Baptist Convention” from its Constitution and By-laws in January of 2001.

First Baptist participated in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the early 1990s. The church is one of the leading congregations of the national organization of CBF and CBF of North Carolina.

With a rich heritage of mission involvement, First Baptist has always been, and remains, a team player with the North Carolina Baptist State Convention and the Wilmington Baptist Association as well as a leading church in numerous ecumenical ministry efforts around the city.

First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina has always believed its foundation is solidified by strongly held traditional Baptist convictions concerning the authority of scripture, the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, believer's baptism and religious liberty.

In 2002, First Baptist spent a good deal of time and effort discussing and determining who they are as a congregation by writing and agreeing upon the following mission, vision and values statements:

Standing on the shoulders of those who have come before us, and believing that the best is yet to be for our congregation, we the members of First Baptist Church Wilmington, North Carolina, commit to the following:

**Mission Vision and Values
of First Baptist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina**

Our Mission: To honor God by becoming and helping others become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Our Vision: To become a community of believers that is open and welcoming to anyone, no matter where they are on their faith journey, and is intentionally joining with Christ in his redemptive work and purposes in the world.

The core values that we, the members of First Baptist Church, are intentional in our efforts to live by are:

Biblical: believing the Bible is true and that its teaching is the catalyst for life-change in an individual and the church

Evangelistic: believing unchurched people matter to God, and therefore ought to matter to the church

Relevant: believing the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally sound

Transformational: believing followers of Jesus should live authentic Christian lives and strive for continuous spiritual growth

Purposeful: believing the church is a unified community of servants, each one exercising their unique spiritual gifts, and structured according to the nature and mission of the church

Loving: believing loving relationships should permeate every aspect of church life

Relational: believing life-change happens best through relationships

Excellent: believing excellence honors God and inspires people

Spiritual: believing the pursuit of full devotion to Christ and His cause is expected of every believer

Free: believing in religious liberty for all people, the separation of church and state, and the autonomy of the local church

CHAPTER ONE



A Heritage of Hope through Fragile Beginnings

The history of Baptists is written in blood, sweat and tears. Despised and rejected by leaders of the Anglican Church of England, the earliest Baptists were living examples of perseverance during their infancy years of seventeenth century England. Influenced by Anabaptists and Puritans, their foundational belief was that baptism could only be administered upon a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The initial mode of baptism was by pouring water over the head of new believers. Eventually a transition was made to baptizing by immersion.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, most Baptists have five foundational doctrines they embrace, but no creeds by which they live. These cornerstone beliefs are: 1) Believer's Baptism by Immersion; 2) The Authority of the Bible; 3) Separation of Church and State; 4) The Autonomy of each Local Church; and 5) Religious Liberty. A high price was paid by those founding fathers and mothers who risked their lives and made great sacrifices in order that Baptists like those who are a part of the congregation called "First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina" might continue to thrive almost four hundred years later.

Under the leadership of Rev. John Smyth, a clergyman of the Church of England and a graduate of Cambridge University, and Thomas Helwys, a wealthy English layman, the first group of people who called themselves "Baptists" was organized in Amsterdam in 1609.⁵ This congregation was made up of a sect of people who felt it was their duty to withdraw from the Church of England and establish a "pure church" whereby they would attempt to restore what they believed to be the biblical model of a church without corruption. Their defining beliefs were that the Bible, not church

tradition or religious creeds, would be their guide in all matters of faith and practice.⁶ Secondly, they believed the church should be made up of believers only, not all people who were born into the local parishes.⁷ Thirdly, they believed the church should be governed by those believers who were a part of it, not by a Pope or authoritative bishops.⁸ They believed that each believer should have an equal voice in the affairs of the church and that each member was to be looked upon as a minister within the congregation.

In 1609, Rev. Smyth performed the radical act of baptizing himself by pouring water over his head. In turn, he then baptized Helwys and others who made up the infant movement that drew the ire of the Church of England.⁹ By 1611, Thomas Helwys and a few other members of this first church migrated back to London where they established a second church in 1612.¹⁰ The move would cost Helwys his life, but by 1644 their opponents estimated there were as many as 47 Baptist churches in England.¹¹ These earliest Baptists were not just harassed and heckled but received the severe persecution of imprisonment, public beatings, and even death as a reward for their devotion to religious freedom, civil liberty, and the practice of baptizing believers only after a personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ. As a result of the intense pressure being placed upon these religious rebels called “Baptists” who would not conform to the demands of the Church and government of England, Baptists began to board ships destined for a new land of freedom across the Atlantic Ocean. In an effort to escape the perils they faced in England, Baptists became some of the first settlers of the American colonies. However, upon their arrival in the new land, they found English Puritans and Anglicans were a step ahead and had already settled and begun to organize new churches in the colonies.

While it is thought that there were Baptists among those Separatists who made up the first band of Pilgrims, who sailed to America on the Mayflower and established the colony of Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, the first Baptist church in America was actually organized by Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1638.¹² This mother church of all Baptists in America met for worship in a small white building that still stands as a monument to all those who have persevered and been a part of the Baptist churches that continue to flourish to this day. A few years after its establishment, a second Baptist church was formed in Boston in 1665.¹³ Soon, there were more Baptist congregations being formed with the exploration and expansion of new land in America. One such church

was started in Kittery, Maine, but by 1683 the congregation found it was so harassed by Puritans that they removed themselves from the region and sailed southward to South Carolina. Upon entering the inlet of the Ashley River near Charleston, the Reverend William Screven and seventeen people who were sailing with him, settled into a new colony and established the first Baptist church in the South. Ten years later this small sect of believers migrated further up the river and became the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina with Rev. Screven serving as their pastor.¹⁴

At the turn of the 18th Century, the Baptist church in Charleston began to send out missionaries to surrounding areas for the purpose of beginning new churches. Those who were recognized for having the gift of proclamation and a desire for evangelism were licensed to preach and commissioned to serve. Rev. Screven himself led the way in this effort by moving slightly northward to Georgetown, South Carolina where he established a new congregation after securing a new pastor for the church in Charleston. Each new church that was started had a connection to the Charleston Baptist Church so they organized themselves into the Charleston Baptist Association in 1751.¹⁵ The purpose of establishing the association was to promote fellowship among the churches, affirm commonly held beliefs, provide counsel and assistance to other churches, and to establish a structure through which churches could cooperate in their broader ministries and mission work. At least five churches that were members of the Charleston Baptist Association, were located in North Carolina, by 1769.¹⁶ It is with this in mind, and because of the similarities in worship style, theology, mission, church polity and historicity, that it is thought the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina was birthed in the tradition of the Charleston Church, and has continued to define itself in such a manner to this day.

History appears to be silent as to when Baptists first entered the lower Cape Fear region of southeastern North Carolina. There is an excerpt from a letter written by the Rector of St. James Parish in Wilmington on October 1, 1759 that states there is "...an enthusiastic sect who call themselves Anabaptists, which is numerous and which was daily increasing in this parish..."¹⁷ Three years later John McDowell wrote of this same group of people stating, "...they call themselves new light Anabaptists; we hope this frolic (dissenting poor families of fishermen in Brunswick County near Lockwood's Folly) will soon dwindle away and disappear as it has already done in many places."¹⁸

The reputation of most Baptists in southeastern North Carolina prior to 1800 was such that they were, "...a poor, illiterate, ignorant, and awkward sect of enthusiasts — a disorderly bunch who encouraged noise and confusion at their meetings and allowed any ignorant man who had the urge to preach. Surprisingly, they even allowed females to pray in public."¹⁹ "They were generally poor, without luster in their dress and comportment, and very often their speech was ungrammatical."²⁰ Typically, they were farmers and fishermen who were not deterred by threats of being incarcerated or assaulted for beginning the foundation of what would eventually become the largest protestant denomination in the state.

By 1766, this sect was continuing to grow such that John Barnett wrote, "New Light Baptists are very numerous in the southern parts of this parish—the most illiterate among them are their teachers. Even Negroes speak in their meetings."²¹ The eighteenth century historian Morgan Edwards reported that, "...Lockwood's Folly was settled by Baptists—fishermen from Cape May, New Jersey. In 1757 and 1758, Nathaniel Powell and James Turner of Sandy Creek preached to them. In 1772, Ezekiel Hunter of New River preached, and organized them into a branch of his church. They initially belonged to the Sandy Creek Association."²² There is minimal information concerning this group of "New Light Baptists" though minutes of the Cape Fear Baptist Association dated 1806 indicates there did exist two Brunswick County congregations that went by the names of Lockwood's Folly Baptist Church and Levinston's Creek Baptist Church.²³

Baptists organized their first churches in North Carolina sometime prior to 1727.

Shiloh Baptist Church, located in present-day Camden County, claims that year as the date of its beginning, and it is the state's oldest Baptist church still in existence today.²⁴ This was only the beginning of an outreach effort that has expanded to better than 3,900 Baptist churches across North Carolina, in 2008. The presence of Baptists in Colonial North Carolina grew quickly to the point that Governor Richard Everhard, the last of the Proprietary governors, reported to the Bishop of London, in 1729 that, "Quakers and Baptists flourish amongst the North Carolinians."²⁵ Governor Everhard went on to lament, "The dissenting Quakers and Baptists are very busy making proselytes and holding meetings daily...and by the means of one Paul Palmer, the Baptist teacher, he has gained hundreds."²⁶ Baptist Evangelist Shubal

Sterns traveled to North Carolina from his home in Philadelphia in the 1750s to begin what evolved into one of the greatest spiritual awakenings ever to happen in North Carolina.

What started as a revival meeting in the piedmont, emerged into an evangelism explosion that resulted in the birth of dozens of churches that eventually came together to form the Sandy Creek Baptist Association that was comprised of Baptist churches in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. North Carolina's Colonial Governor, General William Tryon, was an ardent supporter of the established Episcopal Church of North Carolina, and railed against the Baptists, making him a rather unpopular gentleman in the eyes of many North Carolinians. Governor Tryon called the Baptists "...the avowed enemies of the mother church" and "a scandal to common sense," that was being led by "rascally fellows who are called pastors."²⁷

The dawn of the nineteenth century looked promising for continuing the expansion of Baptist churches in North Carolina. A new spiritual awakening was beginning to emerge from the valleys of Kentucky and quickly spreading across the southeastern United States. Like a mighty northeastern wind blowing across the coastal plains of North Carolina, reports came from Bertie County pastor, Elder Lemuel Burkitt, who proclaimed the happy news of revivals that were occurring from the mountains to the sea. For the year 1811, Baptist historian David Benedict reported a membership of better than 11,000 in more than 180 Baptist churches located in North Carolina.²⁸ The number of churches increased to 200 just one year later, and the number of members had grown to 13,000.²⁹ One of these churches was a small congregation that was formed sometime prior to 1808 in the growing port city of Wilmington.

According to minutes of the Cape Fear Baptist Association, meeting in their annual session on Saturday, October 1, 1808 at Moore's Creek Meeting House, the Association "received a newly constituted church in fellowship from Wilmington, by delegates and letter."³⁰ Delegates representing the new church in Wilmington were "an unordained preacher" named John Larkins and Peter Smyth, "an ordained, licensed preacher," though the minutes indicate that the Wilmington Church did not have a pastor.³¹ A letter to the *Wilmington Morning Star*, in 1948, from a Baptist pastor who was a descendent of John Larkins shared some interesting information concerning the Wilmington Church.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

I have a minute of the Cape Fear Baptist association enrolling as a delegate John Larkins, kinsman of mine, to the association from the First Baptist church in Wilmington, N.C., in 1806, and he continued in this capacity until 1820. Now I want to say further that the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C. was organized about the year 1695, then they erected a house of worship with the best material available. It was erected about where the First Baptist Church now stands. This was the second Baptist church to organize in North Carolina. The first Baptist church organized in North Carolina was organized under a brush harbor on the banks of Black river near site of the present Hawbluff Baptist. The members organizing this church had letters of dismission from a Baptist church in Bath, England. The first church house of any denomination was built of logs on the Black river at a place then called Larkin's Landing. I have a photograph of that old log church. All history of North Carolina, both profane and sacred began in South Eastern North Carolina. These Baptists, who were Larkins, came from Bath, England in 1690.³²

This writer has been unable to find further information that substantiates these claims.

The initial report from the Wilmington Church revealed it was the smallest church in the Association with only twenty members. In addition to applying for membership into the Cape Fear Association, the new church in Wilmington sent a contribution of ten English shillings to be used for mission work by the Association. There were nineteen churches that made up the Cape Fear Baptist Association at this time with memberships ranging from a low of twenty in Wilmington to over two hundred in the Cape Fear Baptist Church meeting in Fayetteville. The geographical make-up of the Association involved churches in Cumberland, Bladen, Robeson, Brunswick, and New Hanover, Onslow, and Sampson counties. From its meager beginning, Wilmington's first Baptist church made mission work, and giving to mission causes a top priority.

The following year, 1809, the Wilmington Church was again represented at the annual meeting of the Cape Fear Association. This time the meeting was held at the New River Meeting House in Onslow County and Peter Smyth accompanied two new delegates representing the Baptist Church in Wilmington. Simon Sellers and Rueben Everitt —ordained

ministers—joined Peter Smyth to report that the fledgling church had baptized six new believers since they last met at Moore's Creek in 1808, and they had received two new members by transfer of their membership from sister churches.³³ The church reported they were still without a pastor, and again, they contributed ten shillings to partnership mission causes.

The next report from the Wilmington Church would come two years later when Rueben Everitt and Peter Smyth traveled to Nahungo Meeting House in Duplin County for the annual meeting of the Cape Fear Baptist Association that occurred on October 5. There were now twenty-three churches making up the Association and the church in Wilmington was reporting only twenty members. Still the smallest of the Baptist churches in southeastern North Carolina, the Wilmington congregation reported it had excommunicated two members since it last reported to the Association.

Church discipline was an important part of the history of the Wilmington Church and the dismissal of members was a frequent occurrence in the early years of this body of believers. It is only conjecture, but the congregation must have been concerned that minimal numerical growth was taking place for the church. Stability was obvious by the fact that familiar names are representing the church at the annual meetings of the Cape Fear Association, but growth was almost non-existent in the early years while most other congregations of other denominations were on the rise in Wilmington. Though the congregation was not growing in number, their gifts toward mission work were slowly increasing. In 1811, they contributed fifteen shillings to mission work within the Association.³⁴

Minutes of the Cape Fear Association indicate the Wilmington Church reported every year through 1825. By this time, the church had grown to forty-three members having baptized fourteen new believers under the capable leadership of Rev. Jonathan Bryan in that year. It may be inferred that Rev. Bryan served as pastor of the congregation in 1824 and 1825 because he is the lone representative of the Wilmington Church at the annual Associational meetings.

Between the years of 1811 and 1824, the names of Reuben Everitt, John Everitt (this may be the same person), John Larkins, Peter Smyth and John Picket appear regularly as delegates from the Wilmington Church. While the church never reported having a pastor during these years, all of these men were listed as "ordained preachers" in the annual

minutes of the Association so it is quite probable that they took turns leading the congregation in worship and made up the administrative and pastoral leadership of the church. Unfortunately, there are no records or minutes of meetings held by the Wilmington Church prior to 1833 that still exist within the church. Information concerning the buildings, leaders, struggles, revivals, pastors and the like has been ascertained from reading minutes of the Cape Fear and Goshen Baptist Associations as well as recordings of local historians.

By 1826, the Cape Fear Association had grown to thirty-four churches and the decision was made that a new Baptist Association should be formed by geographically dividing the Association. An imaginary line was drawn from Wilmington up the Cape Fear River to the mouth of the Black River and over to Lisbon. The existing churches located to the east of this line would make up the new Goshen Association. Those that were to the west of the line retained the name of the Cape Fear Association. Delegates from the Wilmington Church were not present at this meeting, nor were there representatives from the Baptists of Wilmington at the first two annual meetings of the new Goshen Association. However, there is evidence that the church was still in existence.

According to the "Map of Wilmington," by T.E. Hyde, dated August of 1826, a "Baptist Meeting House" in Wilmington was located on "Lot No. 97" on South Front Street.³⁵ Lot 97 is designated as the second lot south of the corner of Front and Ann Streets, on the east side of the street. The house shown on the map has two entrance doors in the front, two windows on the second floor level with an oval topped window in the center between these two windows. Above the two oblong windows are two half-oval shaped windows. The steps leading to the entrance doors stretched the entire length of the front of the building. Hyde's map "shows the two-story Baptist Church as one of the major buildings of the city."³⁶

It is not known how this house actually became the "Baptist Meeting House." Though Hyde's map designated it as such, the property was legally part of the estate of John Sedgwick Springs who acquired it in the division of the estate of his uncle Nehemiah Harris in 1820.³⁷ Mr. Springs died in 1825 leaving a wife, Mary Gasper Springs and several young children. There was no mention of the property being used as a place of worship or to conduct church business, but it is assumed that John Sedgwick Springs may have been one of the founding members of the church.

On February 22, 1834, John K. McIlheny and Thomas Cowan, acting for the widow and children of John S. Springs, deeded the property to the

Baptist Church.³⁸ According to minutes of a church conference held in April of 1842, Mary Springs presented herself for church membership and was received.³⁹ Then, in January of 1851, Samuel Westbrook and wife Amanda, Jason Hunt and wife Prudence, William Donnell and wife Mary, and John D.M. Springs, all of Guilford County, deeded to George R. French, Nathan E. Brickhouse, Isham Peterson, James J. Bryan, and Benjamin F. Mitchell, Trustees of the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, "one half of a lot on Front Street between Ann Street and Nun Street, numbered as lot No. 97 in section B...whereon stands the Baptist Church in the town of Wilmington."⁴⁰ This building served as the worship center and the place the church met to handle its business affairs until at least 1864 when they moved to Wilmington's City Hall until the current sanctuary at the corner of Market Street and Fifth Avenue was completed in 1870.

The building used as the original Baptist Meeting House is still standing and has been renovated. The house now serves as the residence of Mr. and Mrs. William E. Poole who are members of First Baptist Church. The house sits back from the street on a raised lot that has been designated as "Baptist Hill." The First Baptist Church has a Sunday School class for adults that goes by this same name.

The Wilmington Church sent its first delegates to the annual meeting of the Goshen Baptist Association, in October of 1829, when it met in session at the Limestone Meeting House in Duplin County. Morris Parker and J. King brought the report that thirty-four members made up the Wilmington congregation and they sent \$1.50 to be used for mission work.⁴¹ Mr. Parker continued representing the Wilmington Church at the annual meetings for the next three years.

By 1832, the membership had grown to fifty-three with fifteen of these new members being baptized and at least six having been excluded from the church for disciplinary reasons such as conduct unbecoming of a Christian, failure to attend church meetings, or speaking negatively about the church.⁴² The Reverend James McDaniel, a pastor from Fayetteville who was instrumental in the founding of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in 1830, was present at each meeting of the Goshen Association to provide leadership and often times a sermon. The name of James McDaniel also appears throughout the early minutes of the Wilmington Church before he eventually became its pastor in 1844.

The Second Organization: 1833

The 1830s found Wilmington at peace with the world. Following the War of 1812, the citizens of this port city settled themselves to a much more prosperous existence than they had before experienced. There was a noticeable increase in foreign trade due to the numerous naval stores that lined the riverfront. The population had swollen to approximately 3,000 and development along cultural lines matched the advance in trade and commerce. A new day was also dawning for the Baptists of this fair city.

For unbeknownst reasons, the Wilmington Church located on the southeast bluff of Front and Ann Streets organized itself anew on April 13, 1833 with 127 charter members.⁴³ For many years it was thought that this was the founding date of the church because of the lack of church records prior to this reorganization and the distinctiveness of the church's statement of Constitution and Covenant found in Appendix One.

It is disappointing that the remainder of this page in the Book of Minutes is torn so there are no names that appear. However, because of the notation that this meeting took place in the "Baptist Meeting House" we are assured of the fact that the church had previously been organized into existence. There is speculation that the church felt the need to "reconstitute," rather than reorganize itself because of the newly constituted Baptist State Convention of North Carolina which occurred in 1830. Many Baptist churches about this time did reconstitute, or reorganize in order to become supportive members of the Baptist State Convention, and to receive benefits offered by doing so. The Wilmington Church reaped such a reward when the Convention met in 1833. It was at this meeting that "an appropriation of one hundred dollars was made to the Wilmington Church and one hundred dollars to the Washington Church, provided that the churches secure ministers approved by the Board."⁴⁴

With the reconstitution of the church came a new excitement within the congregation, and their first "official" pastor. In addition to the recorded minutes of the church, the report of the Goshen Baptist Association meeting in October of 1833 at Lisbon Meeting House in Sampson County, notes Reverend Jacob C. Grigg as pastor of the Wilmington Church and a delegate representing the congregation along with two laymen, Dennis Collins and H. Costin. It is also noted that Rev. Grigg delivered a sermon at this meeting, along with Rev. James McDaniel of Fayetteville. In addition to the report that the Wilmington Church now had eighty-nine members, having baptized thirty-five in the last year, Rev. Grigg presented a letter at the meeting that stated:

This church was first constituted on April 13, 1833. At its constitution, Elders Lewis Whitfield and John Armstrong presided, and assisted it by their advice and council. At its constitution, brethren Warren and Grigg were requested to take pastoral charge of the brethren, to which they also submitted. Through indisposition and other engagements Brother Warren has been precluded from filling up his appointment. The present number of members is 89 of whom 34 have been baptized since last February; the others (new members) were received by letter.⁴⁵

Rev. Grigg also represented the church at the meeting of the Baptist State Convention that year and was made chairman of the committee on Sabbath Schools because the reorganized Wilmington Church now had a Sunday School in place. In addition to sending representatives to the meeting, the congregation also sent along ten dollars to be used for education and mission expansion. This was a practice of the church from its first meeting with the Cape Fear Association in 1808 and one the church has continued to this day. First Baptist has been a team player in partnering with other churches to further the cause of Christ through missionary service and the advancement of Christian Education since its inception.

It is not surprising that the Wilmington Church moved quickly in a positive direction upon calling Rev. Jacob Grigg as their pastor. An Englishman by birth, Rev. Grigg was educated at Bristol Baptist Academy before beginning his ministry as a missionary to Sierra Leone, on the coast of Africa. An excellent scholar with a tenacious memory, it is said that he memorized the entire Bible and frequently introduced lengthy quotations of entire chapters from the sacred writings without referring to the Bible for reading. Rev. Grigg had the reputation for being an articulate sermonizer in his early days as a Proclaimer of the gospel. After a short stint of missionary service in Africa, Rev. Grigg sailed to the port of Norfolk where he served as pastor of the Upper Bridge Church. Robert Semple described Grigg as “unsurpassed by any preacher in Virginia.”⁴⁶

Jacob Grigg remained but a short time in any one place because of his weakness for the habit of freely consuming intoxicating beverages and he “possessed a small measure of what is usually denominated common sense; in the management of his own pecuniary and domestic matters, he was a mere child.”⁴⁷ Rev. Grigg was near the end of his life by the time he came to serve the Wilmington Church and had become a friend of the

temperance cause, having himself abstained entirely from the use of ardent spirits for several years and regained the respect of other preachers. After serving as pastor for only one year, Rev. Grigg returned to Virginia where he died in 1835.

The enthusiasm that filled the Wilmington Church in 1833 was short lived. Minutes from the Goshen Association's annual meeting, the following year contained the following notes concerning the Wilmington Church.

This church bewails her destitution of a permanent ministry; and the consequent lukewarmness which for a time prevailed. They rejoice that the Lord seems to smile upon them, in that they have begun to experience in a little the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, through the instrumentality of Elder W.J. Findley, who occasionally visits them. Their membership number is now 81.⁴⁸

That year, for the first time since it began attending the annual meetings of the Cape Fear Association and the Goshen Association, the church did not present a gift for missionary work. It seems that the Wilmington Church did not have a pastor during 1834, but depended on the work of Elder W.J. Findley who was ordained at this meeting. Rev. Findley represented them at the annual meeting along with Dennis Collins, H. Costin and J. King.

Early in 1835, the Wilmington Church called A.W. Chambliss to be their pastor and he remained for the next two years. Although little is known about Rev. Chambliss, records of the Baptist State Convention and Goshen Baptist Association infer that he was evangelistic in his preaching and very much a disciplinarian in regards to church membership. Rev. Chambliss and Rev. W.J. Findley, who was now an agent of the Baptist State Convention in southeastern North Carolina, represented the church at the convention of 1835. "The pastor was made a member of the committee on periodicals and was chairman of the committee on temperance."⁴⁹ The church also sent ten dollars to the work of missions and education that year and Rev. Findley made an additional contribution of sixteen dollars to the missions and education work of the convention. This money was desperately needed for the expanding mission work and the founding of a new school in Wake Forest, in 1834.

Rev. Chambliss challenged the struggling congregation to look out-

side its self to the possibilities that surrounded it. Minutes of the Goshen Association confirm that the congregation was up to the task by contributing generous gifts of \$23.31 to the mission endeavors of the Association during 1835 and 1836. The church also baptized twenty-three new believers during this two year span while excluding twenty-two members for conduct that was detrimental to the integrity of the church. A note that appeared in the *Biblical Recorder* stated, "...the Wilmington church is in a prosperous condition. It is a source of high gratification to learn that the prospects of the church are more promising than they have ever been before."⁵⁰ An added notation in the Associational minutes of 1836 stated:

It appears that the church at this place has experienced the smiles of heaven in some good degree. Fifteen have been added by baptism, and most of them very efficient members. The commencement of the past year was characterized by the effusion of the good spirit; at which time the revival alluded to took place. The later part is marked by coldness and indifference, upon the great subject of Religion. They enjoy peace among themselves. Rev. A.W. Chambliss has recently resigned the pastoral care of the church, and contemplates a removal from that place. The church expresses great regret at this. They have a flourishing Sabbath School of 39 scholars and 9 teachers.⁵¹

The church had but sixty-nine members at this point but a committed lot they were. Led by laymen like George R. French, James J. Bryan, Isham Peterson, and Benjamin F. Mitchell, the Wilmington Church, which was beginning to go by the name of "Front Street Baptist Church," continued to remain steady in the midst of constant change and transition in pastoral leadership. This was vital for the existence of the church in its earliest days because the congregation had a policy that allowed for the pastor to serve for only one year and upon completion, the congregation, and pastor would decide whether they would continue the partnership any further. This is the reason for the short tenure of service for the first six pastors.

In the midst of the anxieties and aspirations, heartaches, joys, and triumphs that have defined First Baptist Church, the pulpit presence of the pastors has paled in comparison to the prayerful commitment to God and furthering God's Kingdom in Wilmington, North Carolina by the people in

the pew. One of the strongest leaders the congregation has ever known was George R. French, Sr.—a merchant whose name appears in leadership roles throughout the minutes of First Baptist Church until his death in 1889.

Born in Massachusetts, George French relocated to Wilmington in 1822, at the age of 20, and committed his life to following Christ through the waters of baptism in 1827 through the ministry of the Baptist church in Wilmington. *The Wilmington Messenger* stated that he was “immersed by the Rev. James McDaniel.”⁵² A silence in church minutes leaves one wondering about the impact Mr. French had upon the church prior to 1836. However, by that time, he was serving as the Church Clerk and continued to do so for the next three years. This would be the first of many important roles George French would play in leading First Baptist Church to become one of the largest, and strongest congregations in North Carolina. For the next fifty years the name of George French appeared in almost every important decision involving the church. He was an important player in the calling of pastors, issues pertaining to the business and buildings of the church. George Reed French is one of the people the church depended on when it was without pastoral leadership. His time, talent, resources and leadership were not only reserved for the church. George French was a leader in the community as well as across the state of North Carolina.

The house standing on Baptist Hill, at 305 South Front Street, was the original Meeting House of the Baptist Church in Wilmington. However, according to the June 1, 1838 edition of the *Wilmington Advertiser*:

The Baptist Church, of this town, was dedicated to the service of Almighty God on Sunday, the 27th by the Rev. Mr. McDaniel. The Rev. Dr. Brantly, of Charleston was expected to have assisted on the occasion, but he was unable to come. The rites and services were deeply interesting to many of our citizens. Every praise is due to the liberality and zeal of our townsman, Mr. George R. French, for his agency in erecting a Church, the neatness of whose interior surpasses that of any other in Wilmington; and indeed we may say it combines in a higher degree than any Baptist Church we have ever seen, either in or out of the State, that beauty which arises out of simplicity, neatness of workmanship, and convenience of arrangement.⁵³

Because this article emphasizes the beauty of the “interior” of the

church, it is believed Mr. French led, and perhaps financed an effort to renovate the inside of the existing building. First Baptist did not have a pastor during this time, which leads this writer to conclude that George French was the primary leader of the congregation. It is also interesting to note that Rev. James McDaniel was invited to come down to Wilmington from his pastorate at First Baptist in Fayetteville to lead in the dedication of the new building. The *Biblical Recorder* stated there was a large crowd that attended the first service held in the newly dedicated building and that a Bible was presented to the church by two daughters of a lady who had recently joined the church, though no names are mentioned.⁵⁴

In addition to his responsibilities in Fayetteville, Rev. McDaniel was also serving as President of the newly organized Baptist State Convention at the time. It is presumed that George French and Rev. James McDaniel had a close friendship with one another that found its genesis in Rev. McDaniel baptizing Mr. French. From that day forward, George French probably depended on the wisdom and advice of Rev. McDaniel a great deal while First Baptist was both with, and without a pastor. As mentioned previously, the name of Rev. James McDaniel often appears in the early records of the church.

George French not only enjoyed the confidence of the Baptist faith community, but this esteemed gentleman was also highly respected in the business community. Having arrived in Wilmington in 1822 when it resembled a village more than a city, Mr. French had the determination to take a chance on the lottery of its future by forming a boot and shoe business that evolved into a booming enterprise that resulted in the name of George French becoming a household name in southeastern North Carolina. His marriage to Wilmington native Sarah Caroline Weeks and the ultimate birth of their ten children solidified his standing in the community.

With his success in business, marriage to a local girl and involvement in the community, George French became intimately associated with most prominent enterprises in the area. He built the first three-story, and four-story buildings in the business district of the city. The second of which was a steel-framed metal-front building he designed in an effort to prevent a loss by fires that were common to Wilmington because of the many wooden structures that lined the Cape Fear River and surrounding area.

The *Biblical Recorder* reported that an awful fire occurred in 1843, and that reduced a large portion of downtown Wilmington to ashes.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

It is doubtless, all things considered, the most calamitous event that has ever befallen Wilmington. The part lay waste by the fire of January, 1840, was almost built up again, and our town presented a cheerful aspect; but alas for the cherished hopes of exemption from a similar visitation, we have now another large space occupied but by blackened walls and heaps of smoldering ruins. The fire of Sunday last, destroyed we think, at least two hundred buildings, of every kind, besides an immense deal of other species of property. Between eleven and twelve of that day, whilst the wind was blowing almost a hurricane from the South, the greatest part of the inhabitants being at the same time engaged in religious services at the various Churches, a blaze was discovered issuing from the roof of the old brick warehouse known as McKay's, on the alley next North of the Bank of Cape Fear. Almost immediately, the flames took hold of several adjacent wooden buildings on the Northeast; and sweeping in a few minutes across Princess Street, ... and cut off nearly every hope of saving any of the Northern part of the town above those points, between Front and Water and Front and Second Streets. Several of the houses burnt were among the best in this place, and a large portion of valuable ones.⁵⁵

Brother George French personally carried an insurance policy on the downtown Baptist Church because of fear that such a fire could be catastrophic for them. It was not until 1851, when the church was on more solid financial footing, that the congregation picked up the cost for the insurance on their worship center.

George French was a board member of the Bank of Cape Fear and President of the Bank of Wilmington. He was a founding member of Wilmington's only gas company and an original subscriber to the local Hospital Association and the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad—the first railway system in North Carolina. He was also the President of the Seamen's Friend Society. Each of these leadership positions required George French's time and attention, but it was his love of God, family, and his devotion to First Baptist Church that merited his recognition as one of the greatest leaders in the history of the church.

Not only did he serve in all leadership capacities and contribute generously to the renovation of the Meeting House on Baptist Hill, but it was

George French who negotiated the purchase of the lot on which the current First Baptist sanctuary stands. He also accompanied Rev. John Lamb Prichard in traveling up the eastern seaboard in search of a sanctuary by which to model the current sanctuary. George French secured the services of Architect Samuel Sloan to design the present edifice, assisted in supervising the building project and provided a large portion of the money to build it. In all departments of life, Mr. French was a useful and honored member of the city of Wilmington, and certainly it's First Baptist Church. Upon his death in 1889, at the age of 87, the church and the community lost a trusted friend whose life was celebrated in a service of remembrance at First Baptist Church, and whose body was laid to rest in Oakdale Cemetery.⁵⁶

The Wilmington Church was without a pastor during the years of 1837 and 1838 though Rev. James McDaniel made frequent visits to the port city in order to assist the congregation by serving as Moderator for business conferences and preaching occasionally. George French corresponded with Rev. McDaniel between visits seeking his guidance and wisdom as Mr. French and a handful of other laymen held the church together until a pastor could be installed.

James J. Bryan was another one of the capable laymen who saw to the stability of the church during these lean years. His commitment to the discipleship of the future leaders of the congregation is evidenced by the remarks he shared at the annual meeting of the Goshen Baptist Association in 1839.

Bryan spoke out promoting Sabbath Schools in all the churches of the Association asking that they exert all possible diligence in promoting the Sabbath School for giving a right direction to the minds of the young in relation to the moral government of God, their obligations to Christ, their relative duties to their fellow men, and the salvation of their own souls.⁵⁷

An interesting statement regarding the length of service of the pastor of the Wilmington Church appears in the minutes of a church conference held on April 5, 1839. The minutes read: "Resolved that brother A.P. Repiton be, and continue as pastor of this church as long as the pastor and members shall agree."⁵⁸ This relationship did not last long, and was strained at best.

Rev. Repiton resigned by the middle of November of that same year after having a heated disagreement with James Bryan who was the leader of the congregation's Sabbath School at the time— the same position Rev. Repiton held prior to being called as pastor. Rev. Repiton requested that the membership of both he and his wife be removed from the church upon his resignation. This was only the beginning of what would become a strange relationship between Rev. Repiton and the Wilmington Church for many years to come.

A graduate of what is the University of Richmond today, Alphonse Paul Repiton relocated to Wilmington from Virginia, in order to lead the Sabbath School of the Wilmington Church. After serving in this capacity for just three months, the church decided to call him as their pastor. Rev. Repiton held this post for only seven months before resigning under pressure.

The congregation called Rev. Amos Johnston Battle to be their pastor in January of 1842 after better than two years without a pastor. These were difficult days for the congregation. Minutes of the Goshen Baptist Association dated October 2-4, 1840, include the following letter from the Wilmington Church.

We sincerely regret, that we have to say, that coldness and barrenness prevails among us, nevertheless we are making efforts, by assembling ourselves together, and praying for the prosperity of Zion, and that the Lord would build up his cause amongst us, and that accordingly, it would please him in his own good time to send us a pastor, to go in and out before us, under whose ministry, sinners may be converted, mourners comforted, and our hearts be gladdened by the droppings of the sanctuary.⁵⁹

Rev. Battle would serve the congregation for only seventeen months but he had an incredible impact on the church and the community. He came to Wilmington from the Baptist Church in Raleigh where he served as pastor. Rev. Battle was also one of the original trustees of Wake Forest College. An extremely wealthy man with a superior educational background, A.J. Battle gave liberally of his time, talent, and finances to build the Baptist Meeting House in Raleigh, a building to house professors of Wake Forest, furnish the three buildings that made up the Wake Forest campus at the time, and landscape the campus of the fledgling institute of higher learning that was started in 1832, and developed into one of the

finest universities in the world today.

The reason for his short pastorate in Wilmington revolved around the financial needs of the Raleigh Baptist Church and Rev. Battle's desire to establish an educational opportunity for women similar to what Wake Forest offered to young men. His dreams became realities in that First Baptist Church of Raleigh is one of the strongest churches in North Carolina today, and the school he labored to begin for women in Murfreesboro in 1847 evolved into what is now Chowan College.

It is not surprising that Rev. Battle accomplished these major feats. He was a visionary whose personality was contagious for all those who knew him. His zeal for expanding the Kingdom of God in Wilmington extended to the small congregation of seventy-nine members he inherited upon his arrival. Rev. Battle baptized 150 new believers during his first six months on the scene. This made the Wilmington Church the largest of all the churches in the Goshen Association with 192 members.⁶⁰ They also had the largest Sabbath School and were the only church that met every Sunday for the purpose of worship. It was also during this time that the congregation made the decision to begin serving the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month. This is a tradition that the church has continued to keep to this day.

It was also during the pastorate of Rev. Battle that a large number of African-Americans were received as members of First Baptist Church, more often called "Front Street Baptist Church" at the time. The first record of a "colored" person being received as a member of the congregation was in June of 1838—"a woman named Hannah."⁶¹ Twenty-five African-American members made a request that they be received as members of the church in August of 1842.⁶² Initially received as "mourners," the African-Americans were eventually received as full members just like their Caucasian brothers and sisters in the faith.

In January of 1845, the African-American members requested and were granted permission to have a separate Sunday worship service from the Caucasian members. This service was held at the Baptist Meeting House on Sunday afternoons at three o'clock. Rev. A.J. Battle served as the preacher for these initial meetings.

According to church records, on January 2, 1845 the Wilmington Church took its first steps toward beginning its first new church when the congregation "voted to allow Brother A.J. Battle permission to use the church building for the purpose of preaching to the colored people on Sabbath afternoons and with a view to gathering an African congrega-

tion.”⁶³ They also decided to begin having conferences to handle any business affairs of the African-Americans in the congregation on the last Sunday of each month. It was during these meetings that the congregation would receive new members, dismiss members to other churches, and discipline existing members. This was the same pattern the church as a whole practiced from its earliest days.

Shortly thereafter, the African-American members of the church asked that they be allowed to have deacons whose primary purpose would be to minister to their part of the congregation. This request was granted. Harry Burgwin and Marsh Walker were selected to serve as deacons on May 26, 1845 with Charles Roberson and Mingo Eagles as their assistants.⁶⁴ Seeing no need to have other elected officers for the African-American members, the church as a whole continued to meet and minister as a single congregation.

As the population of Wilmington began to swell over the next few years, the church continued to grow as well. Soon, the number of African-American members almost equaled that of the Caucasian members of the church. In 1851 the African-American members requested that they have their own Sabbath School.⁶⁵ This request was granted. Records of the church indicate the overall membership reached 390 by 1863 with 165 of the members being of African descent and 225 white members.⁶⁶

In 1864, the decision was made that the African-American members of the church would employ their own minister and provide for his salary. On November 7 of that same year, the African-American members of the church requested and received permission to separate from the First Baptist Church and construct their own house of worship. This first building was erected on Walnut Street between Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue. Their first Pastor was an African-American named W.H. Banks. Rev. Banks served for only a few months before a dispute arose among the members of the new work and he felt the need to resign. Upon resigning, Rev. Banks began a new church that grew to become the Ebenezer Baptist Church that today meets on Princess Place Drive. In need of a pastor, Thomas Parker, a deacon of the church, was then ordained by the Caucasian congregation of First Baptist Church, and he became the Pastor of the African-American congregation that went by the name of “African Baptist Church.” After serving as pastor of the congregation for a couple of years, Rev. Parker became an area missionary and planter of African-American congregations in New Hanover and Pender counties.

In May of 1867, Edward Eagles was ordained by First Baptist Church to

become the pastor of the African Baptist Church.⁶⁷ Rev. Eagles was part of the group that originally left First Baptist to form the African Baptist Church, but he returned to First Baptist during the initial conflict with their founding pastor. Upon becoming the pastor of the First African Baptist Church, Rev. Eagles led the congregation to build a new building on the northwest corner of Campbell's Square at Fifth Avenue. The congregation then changed its name from "African Baptist Church" to "First African Baptist Church." The congregation changed its name again in 1869, when they deleted the word "African." They now go by the name of First Baptist Missionary Church to this day, and meet for worship at 520 North Fifth Avenue; five blocks north of the all-Caucasian First Baptist Church.

Two months after Rev. Battle returned to the Raleigh area, the Wilmington congregation extended an invitation to Rev. A. P. Repiton to return as their pastor. Upon accepting the invitation, Rev. Repiton served the congregation for just one year before circumstances precipitated a major controversy within the church that resulted in his resigning a second time. This time there was a great deal of damage inflicted on the congregation as a whole. Hurt feelings, ignited tempers, stinging remarks from the pulpit and the pew were all elements of the developing church row.

The conflict began when a small group of disgruntled members began meeting to discuss a way to replace Rev. Repiton as their pastor. It was not unusual that such discussions would take place because it was the practice of the church to extend invitations to potential pastors for only one year at a time. This was common for many Baptist churches in the early nineteenth century. However, Rev. Repiton was disturbed by what was happening in Wilmington. He felt the clandestine meetings were instigated by a group of church leaders who were being fueled by the desires of Dr. James McDaniel who became pastor of the Wilmington congregation the day following Rev. Repiton's forced resignation.

Dr. McDaniel was an influential leader among North Carolina Baptists, and was certainly respected within the Wilmington Church. Reared in Fayetteville, James McDaniel was one of the fourteen men who met in Greenville, North Carolina in 1830, and founded the Baptist State Convention. He then agreed to serve as its first President, a responsibility he held for the first nineteen years of its existence.⁶⁸ It was once said of Dr. McDaniel:

The finest exhibition of true eloquence ever heard from the lips of man, was the exordium with which brother McDaniel introduced the most powerful sermon ever delivered. He seemed as some seraphic visitant from some celestial sphere. The logic of his burning eloquence, and the magic of the love-beams that shone from his radiant presence while dispensing the word of life was a veritable inspiration.⁶⁹

The *Biblical Recorder* described him as, “a vigorous, independent thinker, decided in his convictions, firm in the defense of the faith once delivered to the saints, uttering his message with a zeal that knew no languor, a plainness which always conveyed his meaning, and with a pungency that reached and affected the heart.”⁷⁰

Dr. McDaniel was the founding pastor of the First Baptist Church of Fayetteville in 1837, while serving as a leader of the Cape Fear Baptist Association. He would go on to pastor the Fayetteville Church for thirty-two years with only a short absence between 1844 and 1852 when he served as Pastor of the Wilmington Church. His close friendship with the influential Mr. George French and the years he spent in frequent contact with other leaders of the Wilmington Church allowed Dr. McDaniel the luxury of a strong voice in the decisions made by the church. He was in the prime of his ministry at the same time that Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina and the Baptist Church that met there was the largest one in the Cape Fear region. The church’s desire to have the leader of the Baptist State Convention as its Pastor and Dr. McDaniel’s dream of filling an important pulpit seemed to coincide thus rendering Rev. Repiton as the odd man out, but he did not leave quietly.

The next five months were some of the most tumultuous days in the life of First Baptist Church. The challenge they faced would determine how they would manage conflict for years to come. With Rev. Repiton still in town, but now a member of the Mt. Holly Baptist Church some thirty miles away, accusations and rumors ran rampant concerning the way he resigned from the pastorate of the church and negative remarks he had made about Dr. McDaniel. Finally, on January 27 and February 10, 1845, in two church conferences, major discussions took place concerning the church’s future relationship with Rev. A.P. Repiton. Rev. Repiton had been charged with making slanderous statements in the community concerning the church. The Wilmington Church passed a resolution that read as follows:

Whereas the Rev. A.P. Repiton...publicly made declarations impugning the character of this congregation...in a way seriously to affect our moral standing as a Christian body; and Whereas these and all similar allegations have no foundation in truth; be it Resolved that the Clerk of the church be instructed to address a letter to him...calling upon him for retraction in writing of all statements and allegations made both publicly or privately, to the detriment of this church, or that he substantiate the same by competent testimony.⁷¹

Rev. Repiton denied having made any negative comments concerning the church or Dr. McDaniel, and requested the opportunity to defend himself before the congregation. His request was denied on the grounds that he was no longer a member of the church and several current members served as witnesses before the congregation to affirm that they heard Rev. Repiton make derogatory statements about the church and its current Pastor. When several members expressed their dismay at the Moderator's refusal to allow Rev. Repiton to address the congregation for the purpose of defending himself, they were ruled out of order. A number of people then abruptly stormed from the Meeting House with shouts of frustration and unfairness concerning their perception of mistreatment on the part of the church toward Rev. Repiton. A list was made of those who conducted themselves in a manner such that it was determined that they had a "censurable spirit" and they were all excluded from the congregation.

When the smoke from the aforementioned controversy finally cleared, Rev. Repiton and a small group of devoted followers from the Wilmington Church who felt he had been mistreated began a new church less than a mile away. Convinced there was a need for a Baptist Church in Wilmington for people who did not have the financial resources to afford a pastor, Rev. A. Paul Repiton led a small band of believers to erect a new house of worship at the corner of Seventh and Orange Street — an extremely rural part of Wilmington at the time. The sanctuary was dedicated to God during the first worship service on December 12, 1847. Rev. Repiton gave North Carolina Baptists a glimpse into the genesis of the new building in a letter to the *Biblical Recorder*.

Our church was built by general contributions received from our citizens, and brethren of the Presbyterian, Episcopal and

Methodist churches, with some aid from our Baptist brethren, mainly in the country. The building, including belfry and recess for the pulpit, is 58 feet long by 35 feet wide, with a spire 54 feet from the ground, and will seat 400 persons *comfortably*. We were much gratified at seeing it filled with our friends and generous contributors (on opening day). We regretted that some fifty persons were unable to get into the house, and were compelled to make themselves as comfortable as possible in the Piazza.⁷²

It was appropriate that pastors from several area churches shared the pulpit of this new church that was built with an ecumenical effort. Rev. Repiton preached the inaugural sermon but the aged Rev. Jesse Jennett of Wilmington's only Methodist Episcopal Church delivered a message on the afternoon of December 12. The pastors of the Presbyterian and Methodist Protestant churches cancelled their evening services in order that they may preach that night at the new Orange Street Baptist Church. The only other churches in Wilmington at that time were one Catholic congregation, St. James Episcopal Parish, and the Baptist church on Front Street.

The excitement of the start of this new Baptist work in Wilmington caused its pastor to express his vision in writing, "Our church, it is believed, has the prospect, from its auspicious opening, of much usefulness."⁷³ The result of his untiring effort, much of which was done without remuneration, was a church with the reputation for proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ with evangelistic fervor, and the ongoing discipleship of members of the community through the execution of a well-staffed Sabbath School. However, the edifice that housed the worship services, meetings and Sabbath School of Orange Street Baptist Church burned to the ground during the latter days of the Civil War.

Almost twenty years had passed since the internal squabble that led to Rev. Repiton's departure from First Baptist and starting the Orange Street Church. While there are no records that indicate a mending of the brokenness created from the strife that was started by presumed meetings of secrecy to remove Rev. Repiton from the pastorate of First Baptist, a truce must have been agreed upon between the parties involved. Rather than rebuilding the Orange Street Baptist Church, Rev. Repiton and the congregation cleared the debris left behind by the fire, sold the lot on which the building had stood, and contributed the proceeds from the sale of the lot to the First Baptist Church. The proceeds being used toward the con-

struction of the new sanctuary that was being erected at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. In addition to this, the majority of the members of Orange Street Baptist Church moved their membership to First Baptist, some of whom had been excluded back in the mid-1840s. As for Rev. A.P. Repiton's future, he remained in Wilmington until October 1868 when he returned to his home state of Virginia.

During Rev. Repiton's last years in Wilmington he occasionally filled the pulpit of First Baptist Church when they were without a pastor. He went to the outskirts of Wilmington and preached to Union and Confederate troops that were encamped nearby, and ministered to the sick and dying of the city who were scourged with the spread of Yellow Fever in 1862. As a matter of fact, Rev. Repiton was one of the four ministers who remained in Wilmington, namely he, John Lamb Prichard, one Catholic Priest and an Episcopalian Rector during the epidemic. At the end of the fearful calamity he alone of these noble four was alive to comfort those who mourned for their loved ones who were no more.

Change was the only thing that was constant during the seven years that Rev. James McDaniel served as pastor of the Wilmington Church. The seed of Baptist principles that was planted in the early 1800s, and nourished with prayer, devotion, enthusiasm and struggle was now rooted in no small commitment to expansion. As one of the largest churches in the state, the Wilmington congregation now had a visionary pastor who challenged the church to begin expanding its faith by taking greater risks. With Rev. McDaniel in the prime of his ministry and serving as a leader in the Goshen Baptist Association and President of the Baptist State Convention, the Wilmington Church was well represented and respected in Baptist circles across the south. The Wilmington Church was among the few churches in the Association that was now meeting for worship each Sunday morning and had a model Sabbath School. Isham Peterson directed the Sabbath School and was not shy about making appeals to leaders of other churches across the state to begin this vital ministry that served as a catalyst for discipleship for members of the church, and a means of educating poor, illiterate members of the community.

In May of 1845, Rev. McDaniel began to exercise his leadership by encouraging members of the congregation to step out in faith and use their God-given gifts in order to expand the Baptist presence in Wilmington. Polly Moore was one of the members who followed Rev. McDaniel's lead and asked that she be allowed to begin a satellite Sabbath School that would meet on the southeastern side of the city for the purpose of teach-

ing children to read and write, as well as providing spiritual training. Her request was unanimously granted by the congregation with the understanding that she would make regular reports to the Sabbath School Superintendent, Mr. C.D. Ellis.⁷⁴ Ms. Moore took her faith seriously and used her gifts to provide a model for other Baptist women. She began local mission work that would educate and inspire Wilmingtonians. Her actions came as no surprise to the congregation because women played a vital role in the life of First Baptist from its beginning. Nor was it unusual that the congregation required that she report to the male Sabbath School Superintendent.

Although church institutions ordinarily afforded women no formal authority, pious women exerted moral influence both in their homes and in the community. In a society that idealized quiet domesticity, most purveyors of prescriptive literature sought neither to recognize nor to encourage women's public activism.⁷⁵

First Baptist, however, encouraged women to have a part in the mission action of the congregation.

Religion was one of the only loopholes that allowed for women to get involved in the public arena. Females were given room to lead other women and children in prayer meetings, teach Sabbath Schools and take part in benevolent societies. Through their leadership role in Sabbath Schools, women were given the satisfaction of serving both God and their community while affording themselves access to the public sphere. Women were also able to found schools, support missionaries, begin orphanages, workshops, and to ameliorate the plight of the poor by raising money through the establishment of benevolent societies.

At a time when America was dominated by male leadership in the majority of elected public positions, and women were theoretically relegated to the domestic sphere, it was actually women who had the greatest influence over the direction of our nation because of their role in molding the minds, morals and spirits of children. Because the majority of both secular and religious periodicals were published by men in the 1800s, many of the public activities of women went unpublished and ignored. However, if it were not for the faith, hope, commitment, actions, leadership and influence of women, many churches would never have survived.

From its beginning, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina de-

pendent on the support of its female membership, though they were usually in the background. When the convention met in 1831, after only one year of existence, two women's associations were represented — and each sent a male delegate because women were not eligible to participate in the convention.⁷⁶ Still, the influence of women in directing the future of the convention was always present because women and girls predominated as both teachers and students in North Carolina's earliest Sunday School days.⁷⁷ There may have been a male in the pulpit, and men in the elected offices of most churches, but it was women who served as the rudder for the majority of churches, particularly in the south. First Baptist Church of Wilmington was no exception. An examination of the membership roll of the white members of First Baptist Church in 1846, indicates that the congregation was made up of thirty-six men and ninety women.

In May of 1845, the decision was made to begin having a worship service each Sunday evening at eight o'clock and a mid-week meeting in the homes of First Baptist members in order to pray together, conduct spiritual conversations and enjoy the fellowship aspect of being a church family. This informal meeting became a vital part of the future growth of the congregation as it was used as a means of beginning friendships with people who were relocating to Wilmington, introducing the gospel to non-believers, and deepening the spiritual arm of the church. New members were still received only at the church conferences held on the last Sunday of each month, but with the new weekly socials being held in the homes of members the number of new members presented at the conferences quickly grew.

It was also in 1845 that First Baptist began receiving a free-will offering each time they met to worship. Any expenses incurred, or mission dollars that were given to local, associational, or state causes, were paid for by donations received from members of the church up to that point. Beginning in May of 1845, however, the congregation elected Isham Peterson as its Treasurer, and A.J. Battle and George R. French as the Finance Committee. It is no surprise that George French would be a member of this committee because of his financial standing in the church as well as the community. The offering for that year was \$272.53 of which \$20.17 was used for local distributions to the poor, \$56.65 for contributing to Home Missions and Education (primarily Wake Forest College), \$41.45 for "contingencies," and \$153.70 to pay the Pastor. The percentage designation of the budget is not that different from what it is in 2008 when the annual budget exceeds \$2 million.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

<u>Designation</u>	<u>1845</u>	<u>2008</u>
Local & Global Missions	29%	16%
Programs & Properties	15%	29%
Staff	56%	55%

The primary difference is the increase in the amount of money needed to operate the programs of the church and maintain the facilities in 2008, and what appears to be a decrease in the support of missions. The facilities of First Baptist Church have expanded greatly since 1845, and now include a downtown campus that contains a worship center, education building, administration building, the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center, and a historic home that is used as space for Sunday School classes. The church also has an Activities Center situated on eight acres located four miles from downtown. The Activities Center houses offices, meeting rooms, game rooms, a gymnasium, classrooms for a week-day pre-school, and garage and athletic fields. These facilities are used as local ministry centers and outposts for mission activities provided to the community. In addition to this, First Baptist now receives eight special offerings annually for mission work in the community, across the state and around the world. These offerings are not a part of the general budget of the church therefore, with the increase in operating expenses of the church also comes an expansion of the mission work as well.

The year 1845 was not only significant for First Baptist, but it was also important to the life of the Southern Baptist Convention. “On May 8, 1845, in Augusta, Georgia, three hundred and twenty-eight men from eight States and the District of Columbia met and organized the Southern Baptist Convention.”⁷⁸ This new convention would be a mission delivery system organized to assist Baptist churches located in southern states in doing mission work within the United States and abroad. There were two Mission Boards, one located in Richmond, Virginia for Foreign Missions and the Home Mission Board was stationed in Marion, Alabama but later relocated to Atlanta. First Baptist Church of Wilmington sent Rev. James McDaniel and “Brother Havens” to this initial meeting. The church continued being a contributing member of the convention by providing financial support, messengers to convention meetings, members who served as missionaries and leaders of the convention, and First Baptist served as host of the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1897.

Steady progress continued for the Baptists of Wilmington under the leadership of Rev. McDaniel. One of the emphases he placed upon the con-

gregation was the importance of maintaining the conduct of a committed Christian in all areas of life and at all times. To deviate from such behavior carried the possibility of being expelled from the fellowship of the church. A public hearing was held at the monthly business conference of the church whenever a charge of misconduct was brought against a member of the congregation. After carefully hearing the evidence that was presented, the congregation was faced with the responsibility of deciding whether fellowship should be withdrawn from the member. Upon expulsion from the congregation for a designated period of time, members who had shown remorse for their actions and repented of their shortcoming could make a public apology to the church for their behavior; ask for forgiveness from the congregation and request that they be accepted back into the good graces of the church.

Whenever a spirited disagreement arose between two members of the congregation, the matter was dealt with by the church, with the hope of finding an agreement between the members. If the matter could not be resolved, then both members were excluded from the church until they could come to an agreement. This was such an important part of the ministry of Rev. James McDaniel that a Vigilance Committee was formed during his time as pastor of the congregation and matters of conduct were handled at almost every monthly business conference. In later years this committee became known as the "Standing Committee," and still, later, it was renamed the "Discipline Committee" before being dissolved in 1918.

The responsibility of the standing committee was to discipline members whose behavior was less than what was expected by the church. All members were expected to be present at each meeting of the church unless they were otherwise prohibited from doing so as a result of illness or being out of town. Failure to do so could result in expulsion from the congregation. On one occasion the following notes appeared in the minutes of the church:

Resolved that the members of the church be cited to attend here next Sabbath morning to signify their desire or intention to continue their membership, and that on failing to do so either present, or represented by letter or proxy, their names to be erased from the church membership.⁷⁹

An examination of the church records indicate the following charges were preferred by this committee against various members: "intemper-

ance,” “unchristian conduct,” “immoral conduct,” “breaking the Sabbath,” “drunkenness,” “irregularities,” “profane language,” “hypocritical,” “habitual neglect of the duties of the church,” “keeping disorderly house,” “critical intercourse with a female of bad character,” “failure to pay church dues,” “absence from church meetings,” “general neglect of duty,” “conduct unbecoming of a Christian,” and a woman was expelled for “being sorry” in one instance. The outcome of these and other charges was reported as, “apologies accepted; forgiven and restored,” “explanation accepted; excused and restored to full fellowship,” “church freely forgave and agreed to retain them.” There were, however situations whereby the committee rendered the decision to “excommunicate” or “expel.”

Even with constant matters of discipline being brought before the church, and sometimes the situations involved cases of members making degrading remarks about the pastor, the following remark is noted in the 1847 minutes of the church: “Have we not great cause brethren to bless God for the measure of peace and unanimity that abounds amongst us?”⁸⁰

The singing of hymns had been an important part of each gathering of the church from its earliest days but to this point the singing was always done a capella. It is interesting to note that in most cases it was the pastor who led the singing and therefore the church decided in 1839, that “hymns must be liked in all cases by the pastor.”⁸¹ The congregation purchased hymnals in 1844, and approved the “gallery,” or balcony area as the place for singers to lead in worship though an official “choir” was not yet established.

In February of 1850, the Wilmington Church expanded its ministry through music with the addition of its first organ, though Brother C.D. Ellis was vehemently opposed to the action. After careful consideration of the matter, and encouragement from Rev. McDaniel, the congregation agreed to allow Brother D. DuPre to give an organ to the church with all the members in full agreement, with the exception of Mr. Ellis.⁸² The wounded Brother Ellis continued as a member of the congregation for years to come, but Rev. McDaniel’s days as pastor of the church were numbered.

As had been the custom from its earliest days, the church was continuing the practice of extending a “call” to its pastor for only a year at the time. In December of 1850, the church invited Rev. McDaniel for the sixth consecutive year to remain as pastor of the congregation. His answer was slow in coming this time as Rev. McDaniel told them he would have to pray about it, but that he would fill the pulpit until he made his decision. Three

months later he accepted the "call" but in doing so he informed the church that he needed them to increase his salary by fifty dollars which would bring it to eight hundred- fifty dollars, and that he could no longer continue visiting members except when they are extremely sick or absent from services, because of his increased responsibilities of directing a growing congregation. This did not sit well with some of the members, especially Brother C.D. Ellis who had a good deal of influence within the congregation and the city of Wilmington at the time.

Charles Denison Ellis was born in Vermont, in 1798, but relocated to Wilmington around 1840, after spending his early years as a sea captain. Captain Ellis was one of the most enterprising men in Wilmington who used his maritime experience and strong personality to affect most people who came his way. He married a local girl named Sarah Shepard and joined First Baptist Church in 1842. Charles Ellis gave of himself with characteristic earnestness and devotion to the expansion and increase of the church. He was elected as a deacon because of his love for the members and his commitment to the establishment of Sabbath Schools around the city. In his obituary the *Wilmington Weekly Star* wrote of Mr. Ellis:

Captain Ellis would have been a marked man in any community. His body was large, his spirit was bold, his will was strong, and his whole bearing was resolute and determined. He was the very soul of honor, and sometimes candid almost to bluntness, and yet he was simple-hearted as a child and gentle as a woman to all in distress. His convictions were strong and his feelings intense, but good sense so dominated the man that he was widely known and consulted as a wise and safe counselor.⁸³

It is easy to see why this gentleman of such high integrity would be so respected within the church and community in which he lived.

Charles Ellis was not only a leader in the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, but he also flexed his muscles within the mission causes of the Goshen and Union Baptist Associations to which the Wilmington Church belonged. As a member of the Executive Committee of the church and the association, Mr. Ellis encouraged an aggressive missionary effort by all Baptists.

Having followed the sea for many years, Charles Ellis had a natural interest in sailors and therefore began the Seaman's Friend Society in Wilmington by purchasing its first house and directing its ministry. He was also

a member of Wilmington's City Council, and for many years served as Chief of the Fire Department. Professionally, Mr. Ellis was a business partner with his good friend and fellow church member, B.F. Mitchell. These two men, along with George R. French, were the most important members of First Baptist Church and were responsible for its survival, strength, vitality and influence in its earliest days. The names of these three men appear throughout the records of the church from 1830 until 1890, and the names of their children appear after that. These three, along with Rev. John Lamb Prichard led the way in the planning, purchase and building of the sanctuary that First Baptist Church worships in today. These three laymen served as the foundation for much of what First Baptist Church has become.

When Charles Ellis retired from his partnership in the business of Ellis and Mitchell in 1866, he moved to Chowan County, North Carolina, where he engaged in farming. In addition to planting crops for harvesting, Mr. Ellis also planted spiritual seeds of evangelism in hopes of harvesting new believers. He built a small chapel on his land where he gathered children for a Sabbath school and had ministers from various Christian denominations occupy the pulpit from month to month. Though he had been gone from Wilmington for almost twenty years, when Charles Ellis died on July 4, 1885, his body was returned to Wilmington where the funeral was conducted in the First Baptist Church. Mr. Ellis was buried in Oakdale Cemetery.⁸⁴

Benjamin F. Mitchell was born in Maine, in 1812, and came south to Wilmington when he was eighteen years old.⁸⁵ He soon joined what was then called Front Street Baptist Church and like his good friends George French and Charles Ellis, Mitchell met a young Wilmington girl named Sarah (Swann) and married her. Mr. Mitchell initially engaged in a milling business by himself before joining with Captain C.D. Ellis to form Ellis & Mitchell. Upon the retirement of Mr. Ellis the business became known as B.F. Mitchell & Son. Benjamin Mitchell was a deacon of First Baptist Church but also served in almost every leadership capacity the church had. His opinion was sought and heard whenever an important decision of the church was made. Upon his death in June of 1894, Mr. B.F. Mitchell had lived for eighty-two years, sixty-two of them as a member of First Baptist. His funeral was conducted in the First Baptist Church. Like Captain Ellis and George French, Benjamin Mitchell was also buried in Oakdale Cemetery.

By the end of 1850, Charles Ellis had garnered support for some of his

concerns about pastor James McDaniel. The church was growing in number and activities but Mr. Ellis was concerned that the pastor was abusing his authority. He did not appreciate the way Rev. McDaniel was so slow to decide if he would continue to serve the congregation when they had extended their call in December, 1849. There was also a feeling of discontent when Rev. McDaniel dictated how much money he would be paid and that he would curtail some of the ministry activities he had previously practiced. Brother McDaniel had built a house that he was using as a school by this time as well, and there were some concerns that the school was getting more of his attention than the congregation. Tension continued to rise over the next few months and open discussions concerning the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness of the pastor began to take place each time the church met for its monthly business conferences.

The good news of 1851 was that the church began a "Juvenile Missionary Society" for young people to be involved in mission activities and they were represented at the annual meetings of the Baptist State Convention and Southern Baptist Convention that year. There was no expense incurred by the congregation to have the Juvenile Missionary Society present for the State Convention meeting because the Wilmington Baptist Church hosted the meeting on October 16 of that year. In extending an invitation to all North Carolina Baptists, the *Biblical Recorder* reported, "The President and Directors of the Wilmington and Raleigh Rail Road Company have resolved to give return tickets to those who may come on their road to attend the Convention."⁸⁶ They went on to say, "If the Cape Fear River be in such a state as will admit steamers to pass, a steamer will leave Fayetteville at 6 a.m. on Wednesday morning, October 15, and arrive in the evening at Wilmington."⁸⁷ It is not surprising that the Host Committee for the church included George R. French, Charles D. Ellis and Benjamin F. Mitchell.

The bad news of 1851 was that Rev. James McDaniel was on his way out. In a church conference held in November, it was moved and carried that, "all the members of the church have liberty to express their concerns fully in relation to the present difficulty that exists in the church provided it is done in an orderly manner and with respectful language."⁸⁸ After a great deal of discussion, Rev. McDaniel resigned in December amidst charges that he had mishandled funds and was too autocratic. In January of 1852 C.D. Ellis made the motion that the organ which Rev. McDaniel insisted the church have installed be removed from the church house and the motion failed. A year later, Brother Ellis got his wish when the congregation voted to have the organ removed from the church. This time all the members,

with the exception of Mr. Daniel DuPre, who gave the organ to the church and Rev. James McDaniel, agreed with Mr. Ellis.

After serving the Wilmington congregation for seven years, Rev. James McDaniel resigned in order to return to the First Baptist Church in Fayetteville where he would continue to serve as Pastor until his retirement. One of the last things he did before his death on Christmas Day, 1869, was make a trip to Wilmington, in order to see the beautiful sanctuary erected by the First Baptist Church on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. It is written that upon seeing the new building "he was much gratified at the good fortune of the church in being able to provide such a house in which to worship its great God."⁸⁹

Upon accepting the resignation of Rev. McDaniel, the church appointed George French, Charles Ellis, Daniel DuPre and B.F. Mitchell as the committee charged with the responsibility of finding a new pastor. The first name presented by George French was Rev. John Lamb Prichard, a pastor from Danville, Virginia who had led in a revival at the Wilmington church in the spring of 1849. When the motion was made that Rev. Prichard be invited to be their next pastor, a vote was taken. However, Rev. Prichard failed to be called with only 13 members voting for him, and 29 voting against. While he was not called to pastor the Wilmington church at that time, Rev. Prichard provides a glimpse into his life, and the city of Wilmington in the following excerpts from two letters to his wife. The first is dated April 25, 1849 and the second is dated May 8, 1849.

I am now in Wilmington visiting with Brother McDaniel. Brother McDaniel has invited me to stay with him and hold a protracted meeting. I have concluded to do so. I shall be absent until the last of May. I expect to be all the time engaged in preaching. I trust that this decision will meet with your approbation, and that of my brethren.⁹⁰

Wilmington is a much larger place than I expected; over eight thousand inhabitants. It has much commercial importance. You can have no idea of the quantity of lumber, tar, turpentine, etc... that find a market here. Shipping from various parts of the world, may be seen here. In every direction, you see turpentine distilleries, steam, saw and grist mills, rice mills, etc. ...I have preached several times since I have been here, and expect to preach tonight, and many more times. Time moves slowly. It seems I have been absent a long time. But I will soon

fly off, if I can only be usefully employed. We expect to start to Charleston, Monday week.⁹¹

Church records do not indicate the reason for their resistance to calling Rev. Prichard, but Wilmington's First Baptist Church called Rev. W.H. Jordan to be their pastor in June of 1852.⁹² It was agreed that his salary would be one thousand dollars. Rev. Jordan was a native of Bertie County, North Carolina and educated at Chapel Hill.⁹³ He was forty-nine years old when he came to pastor the Wilmington Church having already served churches in Raleigh and Warrenton. Rev. Jordan arrived in Wilmington with the reputation for being an eloquent speaker whose articulation was seldom matched.

In addition to his ability to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, Rev. Jordan was a man whose name was a household word among North Carolina Baptists. For many years he served as the corresponding secretary of the Baptist State Convention, was agent for Wake Forest College on two occasions, and for several years served as a trustee of Wake Forest providing generous financial support and leadership during its early years of financial distress and educational formation.

Rev. Jordan referred to himself as a "high-church Baptist" who had a fire for evangelism.⁹⁴ Jordan's zeal for evangelism is evidenced by the fact that he preached his first sermon less than one month after professing his hope in Christ at the age of twenty. According to the *Biblical Recorder*, his first series of sermons sent forth a great revival that spread to several surrounding counties and resulted in the conversion of better than two thousand souls.⁹⁵ Rev. Jordan was respected among all who knew him for "his stainless purity, his shining character as a Christian, his devout and humble piety, his unswerving loyalty to truth and to God, as well as for his splendid talents and attainments as a preacher."⁹⁶

Rev. Jordan provided a sense of stability for the Wilmington Church while filling its pulpit. It was during his pastorate that the congregation designated Thursdays of each week as a day of fasting and prayer by all the members. The church also expanded its financial support for mission causes by leading all other churches in the state. By 1854, the church began having a choir to lead the singing in each worship service and purchased new hymnals to be used by the choir. When news of the choir traveled up the Cape Fear River to Fayetteville, former pastor Rev. James McDaniel once again entered the story of Wilmington's First Baptist Church.

Rev. McDaniel assumed the church was receiving strong financial support from its members so he sent a letter informing its leaders that the

Wilmington Church owed him in excess of two hundred seventy-five dollars for payment of a portion of his salary they had failed to pay when he served as their pastor, interest on the salary, rent for using his school house for Sabbath School classes and reimbursement for the purchase of an organ for the church. After meeting every other week for three months, the church determined that they would pay Rev. McDaniel two hundred dollars for the salary he claimed to be owed, the interest on the salary, and for the use of his school house. As for the cost of the organ, the church leaders understood Rev. McDaniel wanted to provide it as a gift to the Music Ministry and they received it as such.⁹⁷

Upon paying Rev. McDaniel, the church immediately added a new building on the Baptist Hill property that was used to house the Sabbath School classes and no longer used the former pastor's building. Rev. Jordan closed his ministry as pastor of the church shortly thereafter by resigning in September, 1855. In February of the following year, the notable pastorate of Rev. John Lamb Pritchard began.

First Baptist Church leaned not on its own understanding but its hope in Jesus Christ during the internal turmoil of its fragile genesis. The small band of approximately twenty believers not only survived the challenges of early nineteenth century Wilmington but flourished amidst the growth of the city. Strong lay leadership was evident in the years prior to the church calling its first pastor. The commitment of members like George French, Benjamin Mitchell, C.D. Ellis, James Bryan, and Polly Moore saw the church through its humble beginnings. The financial leadership of Mr. French was matched by the devotion of James Bryan and Polly Moore to directing a Sabbath School ministry that touched residents across Wilmington, regardless of race. The birth of the "colored congregation," led by A.J. Battle, proved to be a witness that manifested itself in a missionary movement to proactively start new churches, not just have them begin as a reaction to church conflict. Like first-century Christians, Wilmington's earliest Baptists met in one another's homes for prayer and fellowship as they sought God's direction for their future. The support of mission causes that marked its first meetings would continue being a defining part of the fledgling Baptist fellowship. After almost fifty years of meeting in a clap board house on Front Street, Wilmington's first Baptists were hopeful they could build a new house of worship to the glory of God.

CHAPTER TWO



A Heritage of Hope through Death and Celebration

From September of 1855, until the end of the year, the pulpit of First Baptist Church was filled by various pastors from around the southeastern corner of North Carolina. One noteworthy pastor who accepted the invitation to supply the pulpit was former pastor Rev. A. P. Repiton who was still serving as pastor of Wilmington's Orange Street Baptist Church—the only other Baptist church in the city. Rev. John Lamb Prichard filled the pulpit on December 27, preaching in the morning and the evening. Rev. Prichard was serving as pastor of the Lynchburg Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia at the time, having moved there from the Danville Baptist Church four years earlier.

This was the same John Lamb Prichard whose name was presented to the Wilmington Church in 1851, but failed to get a majority of the votes needed to become its pastor. Once again there were members who were so impressed with Rev. Prichard that they wanted him to become their pastor. At a regularly scheduled conference of the church held on December 31, C.D. Ellis made a motion that the First Baptist Church extends a call to Rev. John Lamb Prichard to become its pastor with a beginning salary of one thousand four hundred dollars for one year.⁹⁸ Benjamin F. Mitchell and George R. French spoke on behalf of the motion and the decision was made to invite Rev. Prichard to move to Wilmington. On January 7, 1856, Rev. Prichard accepted the call and began his duties by leading a prayer service at 8:00 p.m. on January 31—his first day in town. He would continue serving the congregation and the city of Wilmington in what many people see as the most notable pastorate in the history of First Baptist Church.

John Lamb Prichard was born in 1811, and reared on a farm in Pasquotank County, North Carolina. He was the second of six children, and because his father died when John was only ten years old, he was forced to take the responsibilities of a man at an early age. His mother was a devout Christian who encouraged daily praying and reading of the Bible. Even with such devotion modeled for him, Prichard was twenty years old before he confessed his faith in Jesus Christ. Upon surrendering to Christ, John committed his life to serving his savior. As a deacon in the Shiloh Baptist Church of Camden County, Mr. Prichard often walked several miles from his home to the church in order to serve the congregation. This was the training ground by which he would learn to overcome life's greatest challenges in order to serve Christ and other people.

John Prichard grew up modestly working on the family farm and occasionally building a barn, or house for a neighboring farmer in order to keep food on the table for his mother and siblings. He enjoyed reading and desired to further his education but attending college was out of the question because of family responsibilities and financial challenges. When North Carolina Baptists opened Wake Forest College in 1834, for the primary purpose of preparing young men for the ministry, they were in need of students who had a yearning to learn and sought out young John Prichard though he did not have the money needed to enroll. When he was enlisted to begin his studies at Wake Forest it was said of Prichard, he is "the picture of an earnest young man engaged in the pursuit of knowledge under the most serious difficulties and embarrassments."⁹⁹

John Prichard arrived at Wake Forest in the fall of 1835 with little money but plenty of determination. He borrowed one hundred dollars a year from a mentoring professor during his first four years of study. When he was not in class or preparing for one, John was building houses near the campus in order to pay off his school loans. When he graduated in 1840, he still owed one hundred and sixteen dollars that he would repay by accepting every preaching opportunity that came his way. Upon reflecting on the challenges John Prichard faced during his years at Wake Forest, one of his closest friends remarked, "The trials that beset John during his college days provided wholesale discipline for his years as a pastor. He learned to endure hardship and face adversity as a follower of Jesus Christ such that no challenge or sacrifice would deter him."¹⁰⁰ His good friend, Rev. J.D. Hufham said of Prichard, "I have never known an individual on whom I would more confidently rely, to march up to the cannon's mouth, if duty should call him to trial."¹⁰¹

John Lamb Prichard was ordained in 1842, and became pastor of the Baptist Church of Danville, Virginia, in March of that year. His reputation for being fully capable of proclaiming the gospel with intelligence, passion and authority made him a sought after preacher across North Carolina and Virginia. "His preaching was plain, direct and pungent. He never addressed the imagination or endeavored to please the fancy of his audience."¹⁰² Often times he would preach in the Danville Baptist Church pulpit on Sunday and in various other churches of all denominations during the week. Rev. Prichard credited Samuel Wait, Thomas Meredith, John Kerr and N.J. Palmer as mentors who guided his decisions and offered him opportunities to grow as a minister.

Like many wives of ministers, Rev. Prichard's wife often took a backseat to her husband's ministerial responsibilities. He married Mary B. Hinton in 1842, but she was seldom with him as he traveled and preached. Mrs. Prichard was a great source of strength for her husband and provided a son and daughter for him before dying unexpectedly in 1849. Because of the love, admiration and respect for Rev. Prichard's wife, it is written that "every store in Danville closed on the day Samuel Wait conducted the funeral of Mary Hinton Prichard, and it seemed every person in town attended her funeral."¹⁰³ A year later, on October 30, 1850, he married Jane Taylor. She was the daughter of Richmond pastor, Dr. James B. Taylor. Rev. Prichard resigned as pastor of the Danville Church fourteen months later and accepted the pastorate of Lynchburg Baptist Church in January of 1852.

The Lynchburg Church had begun a new building that would serve as their sanctuary but suspended construction when their pastor resigned in the midst of a controversy. Some of its members were beginning to fall away from their faith, commitment to the congregation was beginning to wane and the spirit of the church was spiraling downward by the time Rev. Prichard and his family arrived. His first challenge was to gather the splintered congregation, which he did. Secondly, he led the congregation to complete their building project and took part in the dedication of the new sanctuary on May 13, 1853.¹⁰⁴ Having united a divided congregation and led them to complete one of the finest houses of worship in Virginia, John Prichard's reputation for being a gifted pastor spread. It was said of Rev. Prichard that he cared deeply for his congregation, eloquently proclaimed the gospel, and served as a good administrator.

"As a pastor he labored zealously to instruct the ignorant, to reclaim the wayward, to reform those who had gone far out of the way, and to

confirm and comfort such as habitually strove to continue in the right path. He rebuked with firmness yet with affection, exhorted with earnestness, and reprov'd with a fearlessness which was characteristic of himself." Soon, churches were clamoring for his attention, but none that was more tailored to his strengths than the First Baptist Church of Wilmington that had voted him down a few years earlier.

Rev. Prichard arrived in Wilmington on January 31, 1856 with a charge from a few of the leaders of the church to inspire the rest of the congregation to begin thinking of a new building to house their church activities. He soon commenced exploring his field of labor and laid the foundation of his subsequent usefulness by visiting from house to house, forming new friendships with members of his flock, inquiring as to their wants and needs, and securing their confidence and affection. He then went to work guiding the growing congregation to dream about their future.

They were beginning to out grow the building that had served as their "Meeting House" since their genesis in 1808. Their city was stretching beyond its boundaries with people beginning to build new homes as far north as Sixteenth Street and the population now numbered almost nine thousand five hundred. Their pastor had the experience of leading his previous church to complete a building program which made him all the more eager to lead the Wilmington congregation to do the same. The most influential members of the congregation were enjoying the benefits of an expanding economy and trusted that God had brought their church and Rev. Pritchard together at the perfect time to enlarge the Baptist footprint and influence in North Carolina's largest city.

Rev. Pritchard was preaching each Sunday morning and evening, teaching Sabbath School classes that met in the homes of church members almost every morning of the week, and traveling across eastern North Carolina preaching in other churches practically every night. He had accepted a leadership role with the Baptist State Convention and was also promoting Wake Forest College to all young men who had a desire to further their education. The energy level could not have been higher for the new forty-five year old pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in North Carolina when tragedy struck. Rev. Prichard's four year-old son, James Taylor ("Jemmie") Prichard grew sick with a high fever in early August and died on the fifth day of the month. Baptists across the state mourned the death of young master Prichard, whose body was laid to rest in Oakdale Cemetery in a grave marked by an engraved stone "erected by

the Sabbath School of Front Street Baptist Church.”¹⁰⁵ Dr. Prichard wrote, “Our sweet little Jemmie is buried in brother French’s lot in the cemetery. His coffin is enclosed in a strong box, with reference to having it moved to my own ground after awhile.” Jemmie Prichard’s lifeless body was moved a few yards away and reburied in a grave purchased by Dr. and Mrs. Prichard. It was not unusual for the grieving parents to visit the cemetery on a daily basis.

One month later, at the conclusion of an evening prayer meeting in September of 1856, a committee consisting of Rev. Prichard, Charles Ellis, George French, Benjamin Mitchell, John A. Parker, William Larkins and B.A. Hallett was appointed to study the possibility of building a new church.¹⁰⁶ After three months of meeting with the committee and observing the leadership of Rev. Prichard, a new enthusiasm like the church had never before experienced began to permeate the entire congregation. When the December business conference arrived and the membership was considering extending the call to Rev. Prichard for another year, Charles Ellis made a motion that the church dismiss with the long-standing policy of calling a pastor on an annual basis and let the most recent “call” of John Lamb Prichard be made permanent “so long as he and the church should find it mutually agreeable.”¹⁰⁷ The motion passed unanimously but little did the pastor, or the congregation, know that this would indeed be the last call of Rev. Prichard before he would be called home to heaven where he would spend eternity with God.

As a member of the building committee and having just had his last motion unanimously accepted, Charles Ellis brought another important motion at the first regularly scheduled conference of the church in 1857. “Brother Ellis moved that we build a new church 60 by 80 feet within two years.”¹⁰⁸ The motion was tabled for one month in order to give the congregation time to think about what was being proposed. An amended motion striking the size of the new building went forward when the church gathered in February and it passed.¹⁰⁹ A month later there was more discussion concerning the new building. Location was the issue at hand. The location of the existing building could not have been better. It was only two blocks from the busy port of the Cape Fear River and being perched on one of the few hills in the entire city made “Baptist Hill” a prime spot for a new “house of worship.”

Sailors navigating the river could easily spot a new building with a tall steeple standing watch over the city. The bustling business district was only two blocks northward of the existing building that sat under the

shade of the century-old Live Oak trees that lined Front Street. But, it was determined that the lot was too small for the dream of the growing congregation which was evidenced by the twenty-one to three vote to find a more suitable location.¹¹⁰ A new committee was then appointed to seek out a piece of property that would serve as the new home of Wilmington's first Baptists. Again, the congregation would turn to George French for such an important duty. Joining him on the committee were Benjamin Mitchell, and the trusted B.A. Hallett and Alfred Alderman.¹¹¹

The church turned their interest to local mission projects with the property committee now in place and going about their work. Charles Ellis pointed out that there were a number of children in the city who were in need of clothing. Some of these children were attending the Sabbath Schools the church was operating for the purpose of teaching children to read and write, as well as providing lessons from the Bible. The congregation took immediate action when it became informed of the need at hand by receiving a special offering to purchase clothing for some of the children and material to make clothing for others.

The congregation had a heart for missions from its earliest days and continued the practice of meeting the physical and spiritual needs of members of the surrounding city as well as taking part in the partnership mission activities of the association, state convention and Southern Baptist Convention. An example of their involvement with the Southern Baptist Convention occurred in 1854, when they gave twenty-five dollars to the Baltimore Baptist Convention in order to help them build a new mission church in New Orleans. At a time when they were beginning to dream of building their own new sanctuary that would cost far more money than what they had, the Wilmington Church was giving what they could to the cause of expanding Baptist churches across the nation.

The next regularly scheduled conference of the church was held on January 18, 1858, and it was at this meeting that George French brought a motion that the Church purchases "the lot consisting of one hundred twenty feet along Market Street and one hundred sixty-five feet on Fifth Street on which to erect a new building."¹¹² The motion was tabled to give members time to think about their decision and to visit the piece of property. The next night the congregation gathered for a called meeting and agreed to go forward with the recommendation of the committee chaired by Mr. French as long as the cost of the lot did not exceed four thousand dollars. George French, Benjamin Mitchell and Charles Ellis

were then given the charge to negotiate the purchase and explore ways to pay for the lot if the church's offer was accepted.¹¹³

The church had grown to one hundred eighty-eight members by this point but a revival meeting that would result in the addition of better than one hundred new members was on the near horizon. The revival began in early April, with nightly preaching services and daily sunrise and noontime prayer meetings. By the end of May, the membership had swollen to two hundred forty-four causing Rev. Prichard to record in his diary, "Religion was the most prominent topic of conversation among all classes of people across the city."¹¹⁴ He wrote in a letter to his friend James McDaniel who was pastor of the Fayetteville Church at the time, "Up to this time, I have received by experience 23, restored 3, and many more are expected yet to join. I expect to baptize some 19 or 20 tomorrow."¹¹⁵

The *Biblical Recorder* carried a letter from Rev. James McDaniel, who traveled from Fayetteville to Wilmington to take part in the preaching duties during the spiritual awakening, after receiving Rev. Prichard's note. Rev. McDaniel wrote:

I have just returned from Wilmington, where I labored in the revival until my voice failed, so that I could preach no longer. Up to last Sabbath, brother Repiton had received 34 and there is also a great work going on in brother Prichard's church. The work is going on prosperously. On the afternoon of my last day in Wilmington we baptized 22, in the midst of an immense concourse of people. When the hour for the baptism had arrived, the ministers met the candidates, and a goodly number of the members of the church, at a house some distance from the place where the baptism was to be performed. A procession was there formed—brother Repiton in his baptismal dress was in front, next to him walked side by side brother Prichard, pastor of the first church, and myself—next followed the candidates, and next to them the members of the church. As the procession descended along the street to the river, they sung that beautiful hymn—"Children of the heavenly King, As ye journey, sweetly sing."¹¹⁶

The revival provided a religious awakening for all of Wilmington. It was during this time that Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized and construction began on their building that stands on the

corner of Market and Sixth streets. Presbyterians in the Cape Fear region also experienced a vast increase in membership so they formed a new congregation and constructed a building for the believers who assemble under the banner of Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church. First Presbyterian Church also erected a new sanctuary on Third Street under the supervision of James Walker who would later have a hospital built in his name. The Baptists were more deliberate than their Lutheran and Presbyterian brothers and sisters which resulted in years of heartache, struggle and determination before they would worship in their new building that would eventually become a Wilmington landmark.

The offer to purchase the lot on the northwest corner of Market Street and Fifth Street from John J. Conolley for four thousand dollars was five hundred dollars shy of what Mr. Conolley thought he needed for the sale of this piece of property that bordered his home, but Mr. Conolley donated five hundred dollars toward the purchase of the lot when presented with the church's intent for the property. On May 19, 1858, the deed for the lot where First Baptist Church worships today was signed over from John J. Conolley to George R. French, Benjamin F. Mitchell, Charles D. Ellis, R.E. Brickhouse, William Larkins, B.A. Hallett, and James Stokley—the seven trustees of the church.¹¹⁷ Six months later, a building committee consisting of Rev. John Lamb Prichard, George French, Benjamin Mitchell, Charles Ellis, John Parker, J.M. Stevenson, B.A. Hallett, James Stokley, E.H. Ramsey, L.B. Huggins, William Larkins and Alfred Alderman was appointed to take into consideration the erection of a new house of worship.¹¹⁸ From this point forward the church began to go by the name of “First Baptist Church” rather than “Front Street Baptist Church.”

In December, a sub-committee of John Prichard and George French was asked to visit other outstanding churches to secure information and suggestions about erecting church buildings. The early months of 1859 found the pastor and the foremost member of the congregation traveling between Wilmington and Richmond, Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia before returning to the congregation in April, with the recommendation that the church secure the services of Samuel Sloan, a Philadelphia Architect, to design a building that would resemble the Fredericksburg Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia.¹¹⁹ The model finally decided upon was Early English Gothic with two towers, a high tower on one side of the front of the building and a lower tower on the other. Though Mr. French and Rev. Prichard may have liked the look of the Fredericksburg Church, constructed around 1855, Samuel Sloan

must have had another idea that was more appealing to the leaders of the Wilmington church because the finished product holds little resemblance to the interior or exterior of the Fredericksburg Baptist Church.

Back home in Wilmington, the decision was made to begin receiving financial pledges from members of the congregation to build their new house of worship. Dr. Prichard recorded in February of 1859, that pledges totaled ten thousand dollars at the end of the first day.¹²⁰ A public document was presented that read:

We the subscribers promise to pay to the trustees of the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., the amounts placed opposite our names for the purpose of paying for a lot, corner of Market and Fifth Street, and the erection of a church thereon to be paid in installments of one-eighth every ninety days.¹²¹

At this point, the test of faith and vision truly began. It was a gargantuan task in the face of the impending crisis of a civil war, especially with a limited membership to build a house of worship that was large and commodious enough. The innate faith of the pastor and the invulnerable spirit of the two hundred forty-two members should forever remain as a pillar of strength to all who serve as members of this congregation. "We glibly sing, 'Faith of our Fathers, Holy faith;' these forefathers of ours practiced such faith."¹²²

In May of 1859, at a called conference of the church, the Building Committee that consisted of Rev. Prichard, George French, Benjamin Mitchell, Charles Ellis, John Parker, and J.M. Stevenson brought the following motion that was unanimously approved:

That the audience room to be 59 or 60 by 71 feet to seat at least 600 persons—the galleries should seat 200 persons—there should be 4 aisles—no basement, but a lecture room in the rear; one story high; 50 x 37 with two rooms in the rear 18 feet. The style to be Early English Gothic with two towers, a high and a lower one—Architect will give us plans, specifications, making drawing and will aid throughout its construction by making our purchases at a cost of \$320.¹²³

The Architect who was chosen to design the new building was Samuel Sloan, one of the leading Philadelphia-based architects of the mid-nine-

teenth century. He was characterized as being "brash, opportunistic, inventive, a learner and a driving worker who was hungry for success and who had throughout his life, an abiding belief in America's destiny."¹²⁴ Sloan listed himself as a carpenter, until his master design work began to be recognized around Philadelphia in the early 1850s, and eventually became popular enough to be printed in the publications of architect journals. Though he was particularly known for his design of schools and hospitals for the insane, Samuel Sloan also had a reputation for being a creative designer of churches. In addition to drawing the plans for Wilmington's first Baptists, Mr. Sloan designed the First Presbyterian Church on Third Street that was dedicated on April 13, 1861, the day of the surrender of Fort Sumter, South Carolina. That building was destroyed by fire in 1925.¹²⁵

After designing Wilmington's First Baptist Church and the First Baptist Church of Raleigh, Sloan's popularity grew in North Carolina. He would go on to design the Western State Hospital for the Insane which is in Morganton and today is known as Broughton Hospital. He also designed the Governor's Mansion in Raleigh prior to his death in 1884.

The estimated cost of the new Baptist Church was twenty thousand five hundred ninety-two dollars.¹²⁶ Recognizing that this would be an expensive undertaking for the congregation, the church made the decision to send Rev. Prichard on a month-long trip for the purpose of sharing the dream of the Wilmington congregation with other churches that may be willing to contribute toward the cost of erecting the new building.

One of the pastor's closest friends wrote the following concerning this adventure:

This new undertaking illustrates the character of the man. It was of sufficient magnitude to discourage one who had less earnestness and faith. The requisite amount of funds could not be raised in Wilmington, and the slow and tedious process of soliciting aid from abroad must be resorted to. This part of the labor the pastor must perform. He encountered indifference or opposition at home. Much more must be expected in communities that had no local interest in the enterprise. His pastoral labors were heavy, and to these must be added the task of supervising the work as it progressed, and of traveling over the state to collect money. The danger of failure on the one hand and the magnitude of the work on the other, might well have made him shrink back and wait for a more convenient season.

But, he neither gave up the scheme, nor did he ever hesitate. The house was needed. It was to be built for God, and God would provide the means. So he reasoned and so he acted; and subsequent events have shown that he was right.¹²⁷

The first journey of solicitation realized almost eight hundred fifty dollars in cash and another four hundred twenty-two dollars in pledges. The Chowan Association was a fertile area for receiving pledges because of the past relationships Rev. Prichard had with the people from his home county, but he never took credit for any success he had. "I am about to start once more to solicit aid to build a house for the Lord. O Lord, the gold and silver and the hearts of men are thine. Thou canst dispose them alright. Help me for Jesus' sake to succeed this day."¹²⁸ An example of the letters Rev. Prichard sent to area associations preparing them for the visits he would eventually make in hopes of receiving funding for the new building was printed in the *Biblical Recorder* (see Appendix Two).

By November, of 1860, almost twenty thousand dollars had been committed to the Building Fund for the new venture and better than eleven thousand dollars had been given and disbursed for the edifice that was slowly emerging from the sandy soil of Wilmington. No documentation could be found as to the day work began on the new building, but in the fall of 1859, a committee was formed for the purpose of collecting stone ballast and hauling it to the lot at Market and Fifth Street. These large rocks came to Wilmington in the bottom of cargo ships to provide balance for the sailing vessels that entered the port of Wilmington. The foundation of the new building would be made of these rocks that can be seen in the basement of the church today. The following excerpts from the diary of Rev. John Lamb Prichard provide a glimpse into the progression of the project that would take almost ten years to complete.

May 4, 1860—"Walked to the church. The workmen are laying brick. The walls are rising. Yet I hope to see them rise."¹²⁹

July 20, 1860—"Went to the church. Saw the door sills just as they arrived in the steamer, *Parkersburg*. 'I delight in the stones thereof.' Psalm 104:14."¹³⁰

July 21, 1860—"They have raised the window frames on the west side of the church. I was so glad to see it."¹³¹

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September 15, 1860—"Late in the afternoon I walked again to the church. They have just commenced the vestibule wall. The outer walls are up now to the height of the gallery, and soon the gallery will be raised. O Lord help us to build and pay for this house and give it and ourselves to Thee forever."¹³²

November 15, 1860—"Went to the new church. It has grown some. But O, I feel so sad at the thought of the troublous (sic) times. Lord, shall the work cease? O, let it not, I pray Thee! I feel profoundly the importance of the crisis in political matters. O God forsake us not. Give us men for the times."¹³³

December 21, 1860—"Walked 'round by the church. At work on the west side, turning arches over the windows. Heard cannon firing at the news of the secession of South Carolina."¹³⁴

February 1, 1861—"I enter today on my sixth year as pastor in this place. How many more shall I be here? Lord, help me to be faithful more than ever. Went to see brother Harry, (an aged colored member) he sleeps sweetly in death."¹³⁵

April 13, 1861—"Fort Sumter bombed all night! The windows on towers of our church were raised today. I am so glad."¹³⁶

April 15, 1861—"Lincoln's proclamation received, saying he would order out 75,000 men to take the forts. Greatest excitement on the streets."¹³⁷

April 22, 1861—"Went on the roof of our new church."¹³⁸

June 11, 1861—"Walked to the church. Front gable nearly done. Lord, I thank Thee for this and will trust Thee for the rest of my life."¹³⁹

By July, 1861, the Civil War had begun in earnest with the first battle of Bull Run, in Virginia. Men were beginning to leave Wilmington to fight for their beloved southern culture. It was a war that would cost America the lives of some of its greatest leaders. Families were divided as was the nation. Brothers fought against brothers in a war that would create

wounds and scars that continue to fester from time to time. The thought of many Southerners was that the war would end with the swift defeat of their brothers from the north, but they were sadly mistaken. Four years later only a remnant of southern pride remained, the economy was in shambles, few families remained that had not grieved the death of a loved one, and what was a fertile farmland four years earlier had become a wasteland littered with the charred remains of defeat.

Wilmington's First Baptist Church was not immune to the ripple effects of war as their dream of a new house of worship began to wane with each passing day of the war. The Union blockades that prevented Confederate war ships from entering and exiting port cities in the south made it difficult for badly needed building supplies to make it up the Cape Fear River. Even if the supplies were readily available the church could not afford to purchase them, and with the call for more men to join the military forces the labor pool dried up. The written words of Rev. Prichard would prove to be prophetic when on July 30, 1861 he wrote, "Went to the new church—upon the tower. The doors and windows are being closed and the lumber piled."¹⁴⁰ It would be almost nine more years before the doors of the new building would be opened for worship, and there would be many difficult days for the church to endure before they would dedicate the completed building to God on May 1, 1870.

During the year 1861, the construction of the new building moved at a snail's pace. The War provided a wider field of usefulness and ministry for Rev. Prichard. As troops camped just outside of Wilmington it became the Baptist pastor's practice to visit them daily. He frequently conducted worship services and Bible studies in the various camps. As regiments were passing through on their way to the next battle, Rev. Prichard met them at the train depot and distributed tracts and Bibles while assuring them of his regard for their spiritual welfare. It was not unusual for him to take sick soldiers into his home that they might receive care and attention from Mrs. Prichard and his children.

The greatest challenge of the Civil War for Baptists of Wilmington occurred on November 13, 1862—the day their beloved pastor, John Lamb Prichard, died after contracting yellow fever. The pastor who visited and prayed at the bedside of many Wilmingtonians who contracted the fever was not immune to the dreaded disease. Though he had the means to escape the city Rev. Prichard remained to minister to the stricken and dying. From that day forward he has been seen as a martyr who gave his life for the cause of Christ.

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As terrible as were the horrors of a war that divided a nation, even worse was the dreadful scourge of the fever which so insidiously crept among the inhabitants of Wilmington in July of 1862. The population of North Carolina's most populous city had swollen to almost ten thousand people, better than twice the size of New Bern which was the second largest city in the state at the time.¹⁴¹ The Wilmington and Weldon Rail Road which connected the port city to the rest of North Carolina was partially responsible for the city's population explosion that doubled between 1840 and 1860. However, its close proximity to the ocean, and because Wilmington was home to the principal seaport in the state made it a great place to live.¹⁴² The church directory appearing in the newspaper indicated there were seven churches open for public worship in the city—two Methodist, two Episcopal, one Catholic, one Presbyterian, one Baptist, the other Baptist church having burned.¹⁴³ There was also a Lutheran congregation at the time and a small gathering of Jews that regularly met at a small synagogue. Wilmington was a great place to grow up and was certainly a city where there was money to be made for young entrepreneurs. The port gave the city a certain international flair. Rev. Prichard once wrote, "Preached to at least six or seven nationalities today. Norwegians, Scotch, Swedes, Prussians, etc..."¹⁴⁴ By the end of the war, everything had changed.

The staid old town of Wilmington was completely demoralized by the Civil War...The city was infested with rogues and desperadoes, who made a livelihood by robbery and murder. It became unsafe to venture into the suburbs at night, and even in daylight, there were frequent conflicts in the most public streets...Apparently the civil authorities were powerless to prevent crime.¹⁴⁵

The records of the church are silent for most of 1862. There are no remarks concerning the ministry it was providing to a city caught up in the daily reports from the battlefields. While there was concern for what was happening all around her, "a silent intrusion of death crept among the inhabitants of Wilmington when the packet-boat *Kate* slipped by the Federal blockade and delivered the seeds of a yellow fever epidemic."¹⁴⁶ The editor of the *Wilmington Journal* expressed the opinion that "blockade runners did far more harm than good for the people of Wilmington."¹⁴⁷ He was certainly correct this time.

The havoc and devastation the tiny boat delivered from Nassau was the greatest catastrophe the city had ever known. The early effects of the illness went almost unnoticed but by September, the spread of the sickness and resulting deaths were out of control. By October, citizens of the city and area physicians realized how helpless their human endeavors were against the onslaught. There were better than one thousand three hundred reported cases of yellow fever that resulted in almost four hundred deaths in October alone.¹⁴⁸ Nearly all who were able to leave the city did so as soon as the prevalence of the fever was discovered. Wilmington became a beleaguered city ostracized by visitors, merchants, and farmers.

The entire area was quarantined and no one was allowed to enter or exit the city between October and December. The town was deserted, its silence broken only by the occasional pedestrian bound on errands of mercy to the sick, or the rumbling of the rude funeral cart. A physician who was sent from Charleston, South Carolina reported in a letter to the *Charleston Mercury*, "...the fear of contamination is so great that no one comes into the city to bring anything, and no one from the city is allowed to go into the country to seek after what is wanted and needed. To say that famine is imminent (even present) would be no exaggeration."¹⁴⁹

John Prichard wrote in a letter to his daughter, Mary, who was away at school in South Carolina:

September 16, 1862—There has been much sickness here for the last fortnight and it is now pronounced yellow fever, by the physicians. There is great excitement. Wilmington has never appeared so desolate since we have lived here. I am truly glad you are so far removed from these sad scenes. The hand of God is in all these things. I feel just as safe here as anywhere else. I could get no nearer to God, except He should take me to Himself, where there is no war and no sickness. My times are in his hands. I would not have it otherwise.¹⁵⁰

October 1, 1862—Our once happy town is almost depopulated and a great many have left. It is impossible to give you an adequate idea of the desolate scene you witness at every turn. ...Our trust is in God alone, for He alone can help us and deliver us from this dire calamity.¹⁵¹

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October 8, 1862—Should I die, I trust that I have given my heart to Christ, and that I should go to meet your sainted mother and dear little brother Jemmie. But I trust my dear child that God will spare us to meet again in our humble home to thank and praise Him for His loving kindness.¹⁵²

Rev. Prichard's wife and four younger children (Annie, Johnnie, Georgie, and Janie) traveled to Richmond in August, of 1862, to visit with members of her family. His oldest son, Robert, remained in Wilmington with his father. When it was discovered that yellow fever was spreading throughout Wilmington. John Prichard wrote to his wife and requested that she and the children remain in Richmond until the silent killer had run its course.

September 29, 1862—...you can imagine somewhat only of the state of things around us. It is no longer the Wilmington you left. But the Lord is with us and still will be. I have heard of several deaths this morning, several others expected to die. Have attended one funeral and expect to attend another at 4 p.m. You cannot conceive of the desolation of our town. Scarcely a store open...I cannot reconcile it to myself to leave the many who must suffer, if someone does not attend to them...Must a minister fly from disease and danger and leave poor people to suffer for want of attention? How can he more appropriately die, that when facing disease and death for Christ's sake? ...I have committed myself and family to God, praying Him to take care of us all. And if I fall, I leave you to His merciful care and protection.¹⁵³

The pastor and his wife corresponded with one another with daily letters while they were apart. Two of the last letters John Lamb Prichard sent to his wife contained the following:

October 12, 1862—We have had no services today in any of the churches. Surely there never was a darker day in Wilmington than this has been. The Lord only knows what is in the future for us.¹⁵⁴

October 17, 1862—Well, my dear wife, and do you ask me,

how I feel in view of never meeting my loved ones again on earth? I cannot tell you. I must not conceal from you the true state of the case by which we are surrounded. I am sick now. My poor back and head ache, the true symptoms of the fever. This is my bodily condition. I have no other trust but the precious Redeemer and He is precious to me. Though it may be feverish excitability, I am not afraid to commit you and my dear six children to Him. He has taken care of me and He will take care of you all. But, O, it is hard to think we cannot wipe the death-damp from each other's brow! Notwithstanding this, I would not have you here on any account....my history is before the world, and I trust my record is on High. To God I commit you all, and my spirit I commit to Him. Sweet babes, dear wife, friends and brethren, vain world, adieu! In hope of eternal life.¹⁵⁵

Rev. Prichard had a sister (Lydia) who also lived in Wilmington. She remained behind when his wife and children traveled to Richmond. She provided care for him when he became ill. In doing so, she contracted yellow fever and died on November 11. Two days later John Lamb Prichard succumbed to the dreaded disease. His wife, Jane Taylor Prichard was informed of her husband's untimely death in a letter from Captain Charles D. Ellis, the devoted member of the Wilmington Church who had recommended that the congregation invite Rev. Prichard to be their pastor seven years earlier. He wrote:

It becomes my painful duty to announce the departure of our dear, dear pastor. He left us last night at half past eleven o'clock, and with a sweet smile on his face, has gone to reap the reward of his works. I am sure, if he could communicate with us, he would say, 'Grieve not for me.' May we not comfort ourselves with the thought that he is now a ministering spirit watching over us? O, that the Lord may give us grace to bear this heavy loss and say, 'Thy will be done.'¹⁵⁶

The body of Rev. Prichard was laid to rest in Oakdale Cemetery just to the right of the grave of his son, Jemmie. A large beautiful stone erected by First Baptist Church marks his grave. His good friend J.D. Hufham said of Prichard:

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He was by nature, a noble spirit, generous affectionate and courageous. His will was strong, his feelings intense, and his moral tone pure and lofty. His disposition was eminently social.....influenced by motives of expediency, and ignorant of fear.¹⁵⁷

He died nobly. Unstimulated by the excitements of the battlefield, he stood firmly at his post, amid the raging epidemic, earnestly working, patiently waiting, and calmly looking death in the face. ...The pastor, who voluntarily forbears to avail himself of his opportunity to go, and of his own accord remains with the many who cannot leave, sharing the perils and troubles which he might avoid, seems to me eminently acting in the spirit of Him, who possessed of infinite power, forebore to use it for his own good, but shared the lot of the lowly and the poor whom he came to save. And if such a pastor falls under such circumstances, verily, he 'falls, a blessed martyr.' His last labors may be, in every sense, his best, and from his fall more good may follow than a prolonged life could have secured.¹⁵⁸

At a called conference of the First Baptist Church, the resolution that appears in Appendix Three was presented by Charles Ellis and unanimously approved by the entire congregation. The resolution is an indication of the church's spiritual maturity and deep love for their former pastor.

Rev. John Lamb Prichard left an indelible mark on the people he served. His print will forever remain on the city where he ended his ministry because of the beautiful sanctuary at the corner of Market Street and Fifth Avenue. It was a project he began but never saw completed.

Stories of Rev. Prichard's dedication to God, family, church, neighbor, and community continue to this day. It is interesting to note that his eldest son, Robert, graduated from Wake Forest and surrendered to God's call to missionary service by ministering to the people of China where he too gave his life for others. Rev. Prichard's eldest daughter, Mary, completed her education in South Carolina before being married to Dr. Charles E. Taylor, a long-time professor at Wake Forest College.

War clouds were opening daily on people from north to south, east and west. In these troubled years of 1861 to 1865, Wilmingtonians became intimately acquainted with death in the midst of war, mistrust, hate, poverty, politics, sickness, fear and death. The economic impact the War

had on North Carolina was almost as devastating as the loss of lives. Baptist historian M.A. Huggins reported:

The State had been bled white. From 1862, to the end of the War in 1865, bacon had advanced from thirty-five cents per pound to seven dollars fifty cents; wheat from three dollars to fifty dollars a bushel; flour from eighteen dollars a barrel to five hundred dollars; salt was selling for seventy dollars a bushel and coffee for one hundred dollars a pound.¹⁵⁹

It was in the midst of this political, social, and economic turmoil that the Baptists of Wilmington were attempting to complete the building of their new house of worship. Their appetite for what the new building would look like was tempted by the renderings architect Samuel Sloan presented to them along with the skeleton of the edifice that now stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. However, the wallets of the congregation were as empty as their partially constructed building, and emotionally they were drained as the church mourned the death of their beloved pastor, Rev. John Lamb Prichard. During these difficult days, the church rallied as best they could and attempted to secure another pastor who would lead them to complete what God had begun.

In the winter of 1862, First Baptist Church again turned to Rev. A.P. Repiton to fill their pulpit. The ministry he provided to the people of Wilmington and the military troops encamped around the city during the months surrounding the yellow fever epidemic was of a heroic nature. Now the mantle of ministering to a grieving congregation only added to his responsibilities. The entire city was at a loss of direction having seen its Baptist Pastor, Episcopalian Rector, Catholic Priest and beloved physician, Dr. James Dickson all succumb to the fever within a few weeks of one another. The few laborers that were left in Wilmington dug a trench around the partially constructed Baptist building, boarded up the doors and windows in order to protect the building from looters and the city from falling to what they saw as "the enemy." Rev. Repiton held the church together for almost two years as they turned their attention toward ministering to the sick and dying rather than finishing the building.

It was not until April, of 1864, that the Wilmington Church began trying to secure another pastor. They extended an invitation to Rev. William M. Young, a native of Scotland, who was at that time serving as pastor of

the Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia. The initial invitation of the church was declined by Rev. Young because he feared the church could not provide sufficient financial support for him and his family.

Rev. Young did not expect the congregation to provide him an exorbitant living, but he was familiar with the economic woes of Wilmington following the yellow fever epidemic, and that the congregation was in the process of a building venture that would cost far more than originally estimated. Not to be denied, Benjamin F. Mitchell persisted in talking with Rev. Young about relocating to Wilmington until the wise pastor asked that the congregation prove their seriousness in desiring his services by raising six thousand dollars. When the challenge was presented to members of the church they pledged four thousand eight hundred dollars on the spot and promised to have the other twelve hundred dollars in their hands by the time the new pastor arrived in Wilmington. In a letter to Rev. Young dated May 8 of that year, the congregation "guaranteed him his stay with us will be comfortable."¹⁶⁰ Rev. William M. Young resigned his post in Williamsburg and accepted the pastorate of the Wilmington Church on July 17, 1864. He followed in the tradition of the church by providing a strong presence in the pulpit while leading the congregation to continue its strong support of mission causes.

Rev. Young was born in Edinburgh, Scotland but was brought to America at a very young age by a Catholic uncle who resided at Prince Edward Island. The uncle had plans for young William to enter the Catholic priesthood, but when presented with the idea, he resisted his uncle's pressure and, filled with disgust, ran away from his childhood home before finding a warm welcome by a group of people called "Baptists" in a place called Providence, Rhode Island.¹⁶¹ There, he surrendered to baptism by immersion as a believer in Jesus Christ and prepared himself to become a Proclaimer of his faith by entering Columbian College where he graduated with honors and was chosen as the class orator.

After being in Wilmington for just two weeks, Rev. Young realized the church he was now pastoring had the potential to do great things, but in order for this to happen there would have to be changes. The congregation had outgrown the "Meeting House" on Baptist Hill, and inflation was running rampant in the city. Rev. Young encouraged the congregation to inquire of the Mayor about using the Town Hall for worship services, abandon the old building and attempt to sell it.

The economy of Wilmington was busting at the seams for a matter of

months because the city had become the most important port in the South. As ships made their way into Wilmington the cargo was like gold. The economy peaked when ships arrived and took deep dips when the port was empty. Carpet baggers were moving south and port cities made for great destinations. The Wilmington congregation agonized over the idea of selling their sacred house but their need for money to see their dream of a new worship center overwhelmed their nostalgia.

The congregation followed the new pastor's advice and sold the Meeting House. The Baptists then began meeting in the Town Hall on the first Sunday in August, 1864.¹⁶² It was a good move by the church but they never expected to call the Town Hall their meeting house for the next six years.

The war-time conditions of Wilmington are reflected in the records of this period in several ways. There are numerous statements in the minutes of the church that remark, "...the pastor is away visiting the soldiers." Rev. A.P. Repiton is referred to as a chaplain for the soldiers as well as one who fills the pulpit of First Baptist Church and Orange Street Baptist Church before it burned in 1864. Rev. Young's salary is reported as six thousand dollars in 1864, and for 1865, his salary was placed at ten thousand dollars, but by 1866, Wilmington had fallen to the Federal Army, along with the rest of the South, and his salary was reduced to fifteen hundred dollars.

On February 22, 1865, Wilmington became occupied by Federal troops. The officers reported that they found the town in a filthy condition. An epidemic of typhus fever was introduced to Wilmington through the Federal troops. Between February 26 and June 30, 1865, about fifteen hundred Federal soldiers died in Wilmington as a result of the fever. Several thousand more refugee Negroes sent to Wilmington by General Sherman were reported to have died of the same disease.¹⁶³

While historians say the South was concerned with reconstruction in the days following the Civil War, the First Baptist Church of Wilmington turned its attention to construction. The Baptist Meeting House was sold to John F. Stolter and John M. Bremer in May of 1866, though the minutes do not reflect how much money was received for the building.¹⁶⁴ With the sale of the house, work was commenced on the new building with hopes that it would soon be completed. Members of the Orange

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Street Baptist Church requested membership in First Baptist because of the fire that destroyed their building in 1864, and they were warmly received. Upon selling the lot where the Orange Street Church previously met, all the money was given to First Baptist so construction could continue on the new building. However, the cost for construction was rising much faster than the collecting of funds so the congregation commissioned Rev. Young to travel throughout the north soliciting money in an effort to rally financial support. Rev. Repiton preached each Sunday that Rev. Young was away.

By October, of 1866, the membership stood at one hundred fifty-three which was pretty amazing considering the death toll that accompanied the Civil War, yellow fever epidemic, spread of typhoid fever that came with the surrender of the city, and the fact that the African-American members had left the church and were now meeting on their own. Two more of these one hundred fifty-three were about to leave and they would be sorely missed.

Charles Ellis announced to the congregation that he was retiring from the business partnership he had shared with Benjamin Mitchell for many years. With the retirement, he and his wife, Sarah, would leave Wilmington and relocate to Chowan County where they spent the rest of their life.

The departure of Mr. Ellis left a void in the stable leadership of the laity of the church that had served as a guiding light for many years. Along with George French and Benjamin Mitchell, Charles Ellis had carried First Baptist through some difficult days. Now in the midst of one of the greatest challenges the church had ever faced, it was losing one of its trusted leaders, but there would be others standing in line to accept the responsibility of following God's guidance in directing the future of the Baptist Church in Wilmington. One such gentleman was Mr. William A. French, a son of George French.

William French was thirty-one years old when he began to flex his leadership muscles within the First Baptist Church. He recommended that the congregation begin receiving an offering as part of its weekly worship service. The congregation embraced the new idea with enthusiasm as they recognized this as a means of expressing their thanksgiving to God for the blessings God had provided to them. Up to this point the church was financed by freewill donations that were presented by the members who were able to give. Perhaps this is why those members who were prominent citizens of the city were the ones who provided leader-

ship in the church. Part of their ecclesiastical clout came as a result of their capacity to carry the budget.

In November, of 1866, Rev. Young reported he had secured a gift of five thousand dollars that would be coming to the church's building fund in the form of a loan that was made by James Taylor, a gentleman from New York. The conditions of the loan were such that Mr. Taylor specified none of the money should be repaid until the new building was completed, and that there would be no interest charged for the loan. With Rev. Young's travels proving to be a successful means for collecting money for the new construction additional excitement was generated, but the challenge proved to be a higher hill than the church could climb without making additional sacrifices.

The beginning of a new year brought a new idea for generating much needed money. In January the church resolved that a committee of three people—George French, Benjamin Mitchell and William Larkins—be appointed to divide the church and congregation into neighborhood districts and appoint a person from each district as the "Collector."¹⁶⁵ The duty of each collector was to visit each female member of the church that was assigned to them by the committee, and secure from the ladies a subscription, or monetary pledge that would be used to provide assurance for the pastor's salary. The pledges were to be considered an annual amount, but were to be paid on a monthly basis as dues to the church.

It was not unusual that the congregation would depend on the ladies to finance the pastor's salary because they were used to collecting and contributing money to mission and benevolent causes within the church, community, or for the cause of sending money to missionaries around the world. The *Biblical Recorder*, reported in 1858, that, "a large handsomely bound Bible by Brother J.L. Prichard, in the name of the young ladies of the First Church of Wilmington, was presented to Wake Forest for the use of the College chapel."¹⁶⁶ In 1859:

The ladies connected with the First Baptist Church and congregation (Wilmington), are organized into a Sewing Society, and are doing a noble work for the cause of Christ. The first Church is about creating a new house of worship; and this Society of the sisters has come forward and subscribed one thousand dollars to this object; and already they have about eight hundred dollars made and on hand to meet their subscription.¹⁶⁷

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The ladies of the congregation worked hard to further the cause of Christ by whatever means were available to them, though their names seldom appear in print. Whether it was leading in the ministry of the Sunday School, clothing poor children, training future leaders by mentoring young ladies in their homes or teaching young people to read and write, the ladies played a vital role. It seems the Music Ministry of First Baptist was dependent on, and indebted to a couple of women because church records reveal that Mrs. Margaret French was recognized and praised by the congregation in December of 1865 on her tenth anniversary as the Church Organist, and Mrs. Sallie Repiton was praised for being her assistant.¹⁶⁸

October of 1867 proved to be another time of heartbreak for the church as Rev. Young submitted his resignation in order to accept a call to a church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The sad news of the upcoming departure came at a time when the congregation felt better days were near. The membership had grown to almost one hundred eighty and workers had once again resumed their task of completing the sanctuary. Prayer meetings were again being held on Thursday afternoons at one o'clock and members of the congregation committed to fasting each Thursday in order that they may be more committed to Christ than ever before.¹⁶⁹ Like Rev. Young, George French committed himself to traveling up the eastern seaboard, and writing letters to churches in the north-east and Europe collecting money for the building program.

Though they were still meeting in the Town Hall, the Wilmington Church had hosted the annual meeting of the Baptist State Convention earlier in the year, and contributed more money to the cause of missions than any other church in the Convention. The Wilmington Church was not able to complete the much-needed new building during the three years that Rev. Young served as Pastor, but he led them to make great strides in their organizational growth and confidence. Their appreciation for his work is expressed in Appendix Four.

The beginning of a new year found Rev. A.P. Repiton performing the preaching duties for the fifth time for First Baptist Church and a team of committed laymen pushing the congregation forward. George French, Benjamin Mitchell, L.B. Huggins and James W. Collins were appointed as the new Pastor Search Committee while William French directed the effort to keep the church focused on completing the new building. Before George French devoted his attention to securing a new pastor, he suggested that the church diversify some of its leadership by adding two women to the team that managed its finances.

Once again the congregation followed the suggestion of the powerful Mr. French by appointing Sisters Bryant and French—one of George's daughters—to the committee. On the heels of this new change that gave women a place at the table of leadership came a motion from William French that collection boxes be placed at City Hall, and in the stores operated by members of the church, for the purpose of involving members of the community in the fundraising efforts of the church.¹⁷⁰ William's motion passed but an innovative idea for generating funds that was suggested by William Larkins failed.

Larkins proposed that forty pews that would eventually be placed in the sanctuary should be sold to families of the church. He assumed there were that many families willing to purchase a pew that would be reserved only for them whenever the congregation met for worship. George French presented the most opposition to the idea which assured the suggestion would fail. After a year of massaging his idea with Mr. French, Larkins again brought his motion forward that "the church adopts the plan of selling the pews for the purpose of raising the funds needed to complete our new house of worship."¹⁷¹ This time the proposal was approved.

A committee made up of Larkins, William French, and Benjamin Mitchell was appointed to determine the cost of each pew. Though the cost for building each pew was only three dollars, the price to purchase one was far greater. The goal was to raise "not less than ten thousand dollars."¹⁷² The committee determined the pews located in the center of the sanctuary would be the most desired so they would also be the most costly; five hundred dollars. Their thinking was that the pews on the back corners would be the least popular, and therefore they could be purchased for as little as ten dollars. When the seating diagram was presented by the committee, the congregation paid ten thousand seven hundred fifty dollars toward the completion of the sanctuary.¹⁷³ Additional pews were sold by auction once the building was opened for worship.

The payment arrangement was such that the pews were to be paid for in twenty-four equal installments, with an eight percent interest added to the entire amount if the balance was not paid for in two years. There was also a twelve percent tax added to the agreed upon amount paid by any person, or family. Pews that were not sold to members were available to any visitors, or members that chose not to purchase one. After purchasing the use of a pew, it did not take long before owners realized how uncomfortable they were. A recommendation that the pews be covered came

shortly after the new building was opened for worship. However, the suggestion failed because the debt on a loan the church had secured was not yet paid.

The church now needed a pastor they felt could fill the pews. In September of 1868, Rev. J.C. Hiden of Portsmouth, Virginia was called and accepted the invitation to become the pastor of the Wilmington Church. He set out at once to complete the building that was started eight years earlier. In October, a list of every member—old and young, male and female, married and single—was distributed to the deacons who had the responsibility of visiting in the home of each member for the purpose of pressing upon them the vital need of finishing the task of building the church and collecting any delinquent dues.¹⁷⁴ A good excuse for the inability to pay was considered but intentional delinquency was not and resulted in the expulsion of several members.

Rev. Hiden encouraged the use of offering envelopes that would be used to unashamedly track the weekly giving practices of members. The Finance Committee ordered five thousand of the envelopes and distributed them throughout the congregation for immediate use. The church then went a step further by passing a resolution that essentially determined the amount of money each member should contribute to the support of its ongoing ministry. The resolution read:

The amount to be contributed by each member is expected to be proportionate to his, or her ability; and any member who shall give evidence of a disposition to shrink or evade his fair proportion shall be reported by the deacon, who has his name, that he may be dealt with for covetousness. No member is to contribute less than ten cents per week; but this is not to be so construed as to apply to those who are able to give much more.¹⁷⁵

Even with these new measures in place the possibility of having enough money to complete the building looked bleak. After ten long years of exhausting every avenue for collecting the money to complete what would certainly stand as a testimony of determination and perseverance to overcoming many challenges that were before them, the congregation voted to borrow five thousand dollars from the Southern Baptist Home Mission Society.¹⁷⁶

On Sunday, May 1, 1870, members of the First Baptist Church of

Wilmington, and hundreds of other citizens of the city, finally realized the fruition of their labor of faith, hope and love when the crowning event of the last ten years took place with the dedication of the new building. After ten troublesome and perilous years, the building was complete and amid great rejoicing and thanksgiving, the sanctuary was dedicated to the glory and service of God as its doors were opened for services of worship. Dr. E.T. Winkler, pastor of the Citadel Square Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, was the guest minister who preached to a full house at the morning service and Dr. Thomas H. Pritchard, who would eventually become one of the pastors of the Wilmington Church, preached in the evening. He described the sanctuary as follows:

The Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C. is numerically the smallest and one of the feeblest denominations, financially, in the city, and yet it is about finishing a house of worship which has cost fifty thousand dollars. The interior of the church is finished with a kind of wood such as I never saw before, and, yet, it grows in the forests of North Carolina. It is *curled pine*, oiled and varnished, and is more beautiful than maple, mahogany, or even rosewood. The ceiling of the church is the shape of the roof and very lofty. At intervals of ten or twelve feet there are circular holes in the ceiling, a foot and a half in diameter, which will be covered with glass, and through this glass the house will be illuminated by gas jets, concealed in the roof.¹⁷⁷

“That was indeed a great day in the history of this church; for it marked a new day for the Baptists of this city and section. In their new church house, the Baptists had a building which would rank with any in the country.”¹⁷⁸ What may be most amazing about the accomplishment of finally completing the massive ten year project, is the fact that the membership of the church in 1871, was only two hundred ten and one hundred forty-five of them were women and children. The sanctuary of the First Baptist Church of Wilmington that still stands at the corner of Market Street and Fifth Avenue serves as a reminder of the power of faith and perseverance and a monument to the vision and consecration of a people who committed their lives to loving their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength.

The size and finish of the new building seemed magnificent to the

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small congregation and other residents of the city of Wilmington. The massive asymmetrical structure built primarily of brick, with stone accents, featured a large attenuated slate-covered spire on the eastern corner of the facade that stands one hundred ninety-seven feet above the ground and a smaller spire on the western corner. Tradition has it that the taller spire was the tallest church steeple in the United States at the time of its completion. It was reported that John Hanby, an architect and builder, was commissioned to come to Wilmington for the purpose of constructing the taller spire because of his expertise and the problems the builders faced in trying to erect the tower with its extreme slenderness. Mr. Hanby became so enamored with his work that upon finishing the project he purchased the house directly behind the church on North Fifth Avenue so he could live within the beauty of the shadow of the Baptist Church.

"The eastern spire, completed and sheathed before 1865, was used as a lookout by Confederate forces and later by those of the Union."¹⁷⁹ The taller spire stood for better than one hundred twenty five years before the winds from hurricane Fran caused the spire to topple onto Market Street in September of 1996. Members of the congregation and volunteers from the community scrambled to remove the debris that was left behind with many of the original bricks and pieces of the large timbers from which the steeple was constructed taken to their homes where the building materials now rest as treasured souvenirs. The spire was reconstructed with contemporary engineering support principles to look as it once did. "The buttresses are forty-six inches at the base, almost four feet thick, and walls are thirty eight inches, more than three feet thick."¹⁸⁰

The doors on the front of the building, and along the Fifth Avenue side, are in wide pointed arch openings, while lancet windows occur in twos and threes. The glass in the front entrance stairwells is probably original to the building, though the colored glass that fills the windows along either side of the sanctuary was placed just after the turn of the twentieth century. The bell in the tall tower weighs better than two thousand one hundred pounds; the tongue making up almost fifty pounds. This bell was recast and enlarged from the original bell that was rung when the congregation worshipped on Baptist Hill. It was presented to the church on December 4, 1871, by George R. French. The bell no longer calls First Baptist Church to worship as it did two hundred years ago, but it is rung upon the pronouncement of a new wedded couple, or on a special day of worship. The bell serves as a connection to, and a reminder of

those few radiant souls who were faithful to their calling as the first Baptists in Wilmington.

The size of the sanctuary dwarfed the meager congregation of mostly women and children. Much of the building remained empty when they gathered for Sunday School and worship. Still, these Baptists were committed to the hope of filling the new house of worship with new believers. Standing on the shoulders of those who came before them, and in dependence upon God, First Baptist Church looked to its future with anticipation that their best days were ahead. As beautiful as was their new house of worship, the strength of this band of Baptists did not lie dormant in a building, but in their God who saw them through the Civil War, sustained them when their pastor died, and led them to the dawning of a new day.

CHAPTER THREE



A Heritage of Hope through Reconstruction and World War I

Worshipping in the newly constructed building brought an excitement and energy to the Baptist congregation like it had not felt since the enthusiasm surrounding the spiritual awakening of 1858. They now had a place to call their own, and a handsome place it was. Touted as being one of the most beautiful churches in America by all who saw it, and by far the largest house of worship in Wilmington, perhaps all of North Carolina, the congregation now faced the challenge of filling it with new believers and paying the hefty debt that accompanied it.

Like most new things that are shared by many, tension arises when decisions have to be made as to the best way to use them. In the case of the new building, emotions were warmed when the superintendent of the growing Sunday School began to complain about the close quarters he had in the gallery, or balcony. From the first days of planning for the new building, the decision was made that the Sunday School would be conducted in the gallery, while the "Audience Room" would be reserved for worship services and church conferences. However, by the spring of 1871, the Superintendent, E.W. Manning, along with his assistant, James McDaniel French (son of George R. French who was named after Rev. James McDaniel), had grown the Sunday School to an enrollment of two hundred sixty-three, with an average attendance of one hundred fifty-two students and twenty-four teachers.

The participants were all but spilling over the rails of the gallery and there was no room to add any others. The two leaders made a request that they be allowed to use the main floor of the new building for the expanding ministry. The first denial came in August. The second denial followed

two months later. The third time the congregation refused their request resulted in the resignation of Mr. Manning and Mr. French, though neither man left the church. It was not until 1875, and after numerous requests, even begging by some of the children and leaders, that the Sunday School was allowed to expand to the "Audience Room." Even then, they were only allowed to hold the opening and closing exercises on the main floor. Participants had to retire to the gallery for their classes because the "Audience Room" was sacred space reserved for the worship of God and meetings that concerned God's church. Even the narthex was considered sacred space. William Larkins presented the following resolution that passed unanimously at a church conference in June of 1872.

I move that it be resolved that the practice of assembling in the vestibule of the church for the purpose of engaging in conversation is very objectionable and should not be indulged in. We therefore earnestly request the members of the church and the congregation to desist therefrom in the future, and the ushers will be expected to aid in carrying this resolution into effect.¹⁸¹

The "Ladies Sewing Society" that had performed Herculean work in collecting money for the erection of the new building also got their feathers ruffled when their request for use of the main floor for a meeting of the group was denied by the voting members of the church. A possible reason the suggestion from the ladies failed was because they were not allowed to vote on church matters at the time. According to the by-laws of the church, action on church policies came only through a two-thirds vote of the male members. This was a cultural issue that existed in most organizations of this era, and was not unique to Baptists. Had the entire church been allowed to vote on the issue it most assuredly would have passed because the membership of the congregation at that time consisted of one hundred fifty-four females and only sixty-eight males.¹⁸² In the spring of 1874 the ladies suggested the addition of a "Lecture Room" that could be used for committee meetings, organizational gatherings, and Sunday School.¹⁸³ While the suggestion was well received, it would be several years before the room became a reality, finally coming as a result of their own labors at fundraising.

Proud of their new building, and wanting to make Baptists across the state aware of their accomplishment of finally completing the construc-

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tion of the largest church in North Carolina's largest city, First Baptist hosted the annual meeting of the Baptist State Convention in 1874. The new building was more than adequate to accommodate the one hundred fifty delegates that made the trek to Wilmington for the gathering.¹⁸⁴ Many of the churches were much smaller than the Wilmington congregation because of the after-effects of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the fact that in 1867, the Convention had encouraged African-American Baptists who had been emancipated to begin their own churches, associations and convention.¹⁸⁵ There were already at least three hundred such churches in North Carolina, by 1873, with a total membership of almost thirty thousand.¹⁸⁶

In March, 1875, Rev. J.C. Hiden tendered his resignation as pastor of the Wilmington Church in order to accept the invitation to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, South Carolina. The Wilmington congregation of eighty males and two hundred females was disappointed with the decision of the pastor who had guided them to the promised land of completing their dream of a new building. In accepting Rev. Hiden's decision to depart Wilmington the church resolved,

That we tender to our retiring pastor a hearty expression of love and respect for him personally and our confidence in him as a spiritual teacher who is able through the grace of God, not only to set forth the great truths contained in the scriptures, but also to reflect them in his own life. Resolved that while we would feel devoutly thankful for the success that has attended his labors with us, by which so many have been brought into the fold of Christ, we earnestly hope that the blessings of heaven may attend him in his new field of labor and that he may be abundantly blessed in accomplishing still greater things for the cause of Christ.¹⁸⁷

The name of Rev. James B. Taylor of Culpepper, Virginia was presented by William A. French, Chair of the Pulpit Committee on August 23, 1875.¹⁸⁸ The recommendation of the committee was unanimously accepted by the congregation and Rev. Taylor agreed to assume the pastorate of the church for a salary of one thousand eight hundred dollars for the first twelve months. It is also noted in the minutes of the church that Rev. Taylor would reside in the parsonage after repairs were performed. This is the first mention of such a building in the records of the church. There is no reference

to the construction, or purchase of a house for the purpose of providing housing for a pastor prior to this point in the history of the church. Neither is there an address indicating the location of the parsonage, though the church did purchase a lot directly behind the sanctuary years earlier. It is assumed the church built a parsonage on that lot. The silence of the church minutes on this issue creates the question of when the church actually built the house.

Rev. Taylor arrived on the field in November with the formidable task of leading the church to pay off its outstanding indebtedness on their building. He quickly turned to the leadership and wisdom of George R. French who challenged the congregation on January 2, 1876, with a stirring appeal to make sacrificial gifts in order that the church may be found debt-free as soon as possible.¹⁸⁹ The dependable Mr. French agreed to lead the way by offering a gift of two thousand dollars. It was not, however, until May of 1881 that the note would be burned releasing the church from the debt incurred from the construction project it began better than twenty years earlier.

The first church conference of 1876 also resulted in a decision by the ladies of the church to purchase a stove to heat the water in the baptistery. The congregation approved the "Service of Song" as the hymnal that would be used in worship services. The church also agreed that it would pay the Organist a salary of three hundred dollars for the upcoming year. Benjamin Mitchell's aging voice was once again heard when he recommended that a team of ladies be appointed to aid the deacons in the distribution of the mission monies the church provided to the poor and needy residents of Wilmington. It is interesting to note that George R. French and Benjamin Mitchell, probably the two most powerful members of the church during its first seventy years of strength and struggle are the ones who recognized the vitality of women in the church, and thus pushed for giving them a leadership role in its workings.

By the close of 1878, Rev. Taylor had led the church to expand its membership to three hundred forty. The primary focus of the congregation was to proclaim the gospel to area unbelievers, support the mission causes of the association and state convention, and continue striving to pay off the debt that continued to haunt them. A week-long revival meeting in December brought thirty new members into the church. The Organist was now donating her time and talent in an effort to help with financial woes the church was facing because of its decision to make sacrificial gifts to mission causes. George R. French and Rev. Taylor were on leadership committees of the Baptist State Convention. At this point the pastor reported

he needed help ministering to the sick of the congregation, and the church responded by appointing a "Committee on Sick." The responsibility of the committee was to "attend to the sick of the church; to meet at least once a month; to report to the church at every meeting."¹⁹⁰ The committee was made up of four men and eight women.

May 8, 1881 is a day that will long be remembered as one of the most significant days in the life of the Wilmington Church. The congregation gathered for worship on that Sunday morning, as was their custom, but the day unfolded as a great celebration when Rev. Taylor challenged them from the pulpit to completely do away with their debt which was now at six thousand dollars. The Finance Committee and deacons had proposed that the day be devoted to the endeavor of disposing of the indebtedness of the church. Rev. Taylor told those present that he thought the debt was in the way of their prosperity and efficiency as a church and once they got beyond it they would benefit from God's blessings like never before.¹⁹¹ His words of inspiration were followed by an impassionate appeal from William A. French who immediately committed fifteen hundred dollars. Benjamin Mitchell, then spoke out and committed a large sum of money to the cause followed by words of inspiration and pledges from William Larkins, Alfred Alderman, and Joseph Taylor.

Gifts to erase the debt ranged from fifteen hundred dollars to five dollars, in a worship service that seemed almost Pentecostal. At one o'clock in the afternoon, it was announced that six thousand one hundred dollars had been given, eclipsing the goal by one hundred dollars. Two days later the local newspaper reported:

The scene was one of profound and thrilling interest. It was a touching sight to witness the joy manifested by the members of the church and the congregation at the glorious result. Tears of joy were freely shed. The exercises were closed with singing a doxology of praise, after which the benediction was pronounced by the pastor. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, (it being nearly 2 p.m.), many lingered to congratulate one another and talk over the gratifying result. The First Baptist Church has now arranged to pay every cent due on their elegant house of worship, and we very heartily congratulate its pastor and its people on the success they have achieved.¹⁹²

The building that was originally estimated to cost twenty thousand dollars was completed at a cost of approximately sixty thousand dollars. During the week following the day First Baptist finally paid for their building, Rev. Taylor composed a hymn and affectionately dedicated it to the glory of God and the members of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina. The song (Appendix Five) was sung to the tune of Ariel on May 15, the Sunday succeeding the "long-to-be-remembered one."¹⁹³

After almost eight years of faithful leadership, Rev. James B. Taylor announced his resignation in March of 1883, to take effect on July 15. The church was on solid footing now that it was free from debt and worshipping in a beautiful building. They had a growing membership of almost four hundred and a Sunday School that averaged better than two hundred fifty people every week. In saying good-bye to Rev. Taylor, who had the distinction of having the longest pastorate in the history of the church to that point, the congregation endorsed the statement of appreciation in Appendix Six.

Dr. Thomas H. Pritchard accepted the invitation to become the new pastor of First Baptist Church, in August of 1883, at a salary of two thousand five hundred dollars for his first year of service. He arrived in Wilmington on November 1, from Louisville, Kentucky, where he previously served as pastor of Broadway Baptist Church.¹⁹⁴ Dr. Pritchard and the Wilmington congregation were not strangers to one another. He preached at the evening worship service on the day the sanctuary was dedicated back in 1870. The church had also invited him to be their pastor in 1875, but he declined, having accepted a call from the First Baptist Church in Raleigh a couple of days earlier. After overcoming a number of challenges since their previous invitation, the Wilmington church went back to Dr. Pritchard and this time the situation was better for him and the congregation.

During the time between the departure of Rev. Taylor and the arrival of Dr. Pritchard, the strong lay-leadership of the congregation instituted a new Woman's Missionary Society that would lead the church in future fundraising for local, national and international mission endeavors, and serve as the arm of missions education within the church. The church also made the decision to convert the lighting system of the sanctuary from the original oil lamps to a new gas light system. A year later the congregation purchased and installed two chandeliers, three lights on the sides of the balcony, and two on the rostrum in the sanctuary that were powered by electricity.

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Thomas Henderson Pritchard was born in Charlotte to Joseph and Eliza Pritchard. His father was a Baptist minister and a native of Charleston, South Carolina. Young Thomas was educated at Wake Forest College where he graduated in 1854. It is interesting to note that Thomas Pritchard graduated in a tie with John H. Mills for the highest grade point average in his class. Because Pritchard was the better orator of the two, he was selected to deliver the graduation speech. John Henry Mills would go on to found the Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina.

Upon graduating, Mr. Pritchard was selected to serve as a publicity agent for Wake Forest College. After a year of soliciting for students and financial assistance for the college, he was ordained and called to pastor North Carolina's Hertford Baptist Church. In 1860, he was called to Franklin Square Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, and remained there until July of 1863, when he was imprisoned by the Federal army for attempting to travel to his southern homeland during the Civil War. Near the conclusion of the War he was released from prison and became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia (one week after it was burned to the ground) for three years before accepting a call from First Baptist Church in Raleigh. After eleven years of effective leadership in which the Raleigh Church doubled its membership, Dr. Pritchard was elected president of Wake Forest College, in 1878. In four years, he guided the college to grow its enrollment, enlarge its endowment, and build Wingate Memorial Hall. He then re-entered the pastorate by accepting a call to Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville before coming to Wilmington.¹⁹⁵

Dr. Pritchard arrived on the scene in Wilmington with a deep commitment to missionary service. During his first year he laid the ground work for a swell in the missionary spirit within the congregation that would carry forward to the present day. In October of 1884, the church resolved to divide Wilmington into five districts with a team of men and women assigned to each district for the purpose of seeking out mission opportunities within their respective districts and taking action on them. The church also decided to begin receiving a special offering each month that would be used for foreign, state, and local missions. Dr. Prichard appointed a team of ten ladies and gentlemen whose responsibility was to introduce themselves to any strangers who may worship with First Baptist, then to introduce the visitors to the pastor. The team would then follow-up with the guests during the ensuing week by visiting in their homes and writing them notes of welcome.

In order to cultivate the missionary zeal within the congregation, Dr. Pritchard encouraged every member to subscribe to the *Biblical Recorder*

(North Carolina's Baptist newspaper) so they could stay informed of what Baptists were doing around the world. In December, the church expanded its local ministry by spending five hundred dollars to purchase a lot on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Wooster Street for the purpose of establishing an "Old Ladies Home and Mission Station."¹⁹⁶ George R. French, Benjamin Mitchell, William Larkins, Alfred Alderman, and William A. French led the laity in this effort.

During the spring of 1886, a decorative fence was erected that surrounded the property of the church at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. The congregation then purchased "the property adjoining the church for five thousand dollars," though the minutes do not indicate the plan for the use of the property.¹⁹⁷ Eventually, the congregation built additional space for their growing Sunday School.

About the same time, a mission team began to explore the possibility of beginning a new work in the Brooklyn community of Wilmington, along Red Cross Street between Sixth and Seventh streets. On October 3, 1886, the church commissioned thirty-four members—eleven men and twenty-three women— of the congregation to go out as the core group to begin the "Brooklyn Branch" of First Baptist Church.¹⁹⁸ Their effort was blessed by God and the small group grew to become independent of First Baptist, in 1891. Today, this congregation is known as Calvary Baptist Church and located on Twenty-Third Street.

The Wilmington Church opened the doors of its beautiful building to the Baptist State Convention by hosting the annual meeting in 1886. Messengers from two hundred forty of the twelve hundred Baptist churches that made up the Convention were present for the gathering.¹⁹⁹

By 1887, the membership of the church had grown to better than four hundred, and the worship services and Sunday School were well attended. The Woman's Missionary Society was growing in attendance and had activities every month, and additional requests for use of the church building were coming at each conference meeting. By the fall, William Larkins requested that a Building Committee be appointed to look into the cost of adding a "Lecture Room" to the existing building. They already had the design because it was part of the original drawings submitted by Samuel Sloan almost thirty years earlier but because of financial restraints the room was eliminated from the initial building project. It would be two years before the decision to add the room became "official," and even then the decision was made that construction of the room would not begin until the approximate cost of five thousand dollars was collected.

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Subscriptions of better than two thousand dollars were quickly committed toward the new room that would also house an organ. The fundraising went slowly, however because the congregation was also attempting to purchase a new organ for the sanctuary at the same time, and the cost for the organ was approximately three thousand dollars. An organ was installed in the Lecture Room in 1890, but it was not new. It was actually the original organ that was in the sanctuary because in April of 1890, a new pipe organ was purchased and installed in the sanctuary.²⁰⁰ The *Wilmington Messenger* reported that the organ "has two manuals of sixty-one notes each, thirty pedal notes and one thousand two hundred sixteen pipes."²⁰¹ Various persons, especially Miss Cannie Chasten and her father, were thanked for the part they played in securing, and having the organ placed in the sanctuary. Miss Chasten agreed to serve as Organist for the next six months without payment as a gift to the church.²⁰² What a blessing this was because Miss Chasten was a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music.²⁰³ Not only did the Baptist church have one of the finest organs in all of North Carolina, it also had one of the best Organists.

The year 1892 brought with it a good deal of friction and tension between Dr. Pritchard and several leading members of the congregation. There had been a transfer of the baton of leadership since his arrival. The death of George R. French (1889) created a void in First Baptist's connection with its past and now new leaders were emerging that were not impressed by the achievements of their fifty-one year old pastor. One of the first things the new lay leaders did to encourage Rev. Pritchard to entertain the idea of resigning was to sell his living quarters. In March, "the trustees reported the sale of the parsonage with sixty-six feet fronted on Fifth St. to Colonel J. W. Atkinson for \$4,750. A motion to instruct the trustees to sell the remainder of the property was laid on the table."²⁰⁴ Pressure was placed on Rev. Pritchard when committee members openly expressed their dissatisfaction during a regularly scheduled monthly meeting of the Executive Committee in June.

J.C. Stevenson expressed concern that the condition of the church had deteriorated as a result of the failure of some of the deacons to perform their duties. J.W. Collins agreed that the church was not all it could be but felt it was because of a lack of leadership on the part of the pastor. Several other members of the Executive Committee concurred with Mr. Collins' assessment and raised the question, "Is a change in the pastorate desired?" Nine of the fifteen-member Executive Committee thought a change was needed. A motion was made that the pastor be informed of the lack of con-

fidence the Executive Committee had in his leadership abilities. A vote on the motion was taken and only five members of the committee expressed confidence in Dr. Pritchard. The chairman was then requested to notify Dr. Pritchard of the action of the committee and to inform him that he would have one year to prepare for his removal.²⁰⁵

By the time word of the actions of the Executive Committee reached the pastor, open conflict was occurring throughout the congregation. Several key members of the church resigned their positions and some left the church. It appears there was little love lost between Dr. Pritchard and William French, which resulted in a split between church members. Charges were brought against Mr. French which resulted in his eventual resignation and embarrassing separation from the church his father dearly loved.

William French was expelled from the congregation and not readmitted for twelve years, even after being recommended by several prominent leaders of the church. A request for reinstatement was denied in 1904, because Mr. French refused to stand before the entire church and admit his wrong doing. Grace and forgiveness were finally provided by the congregation, in October of 1906, when J.C. Stevenson, "recommended the reactivation of church membership to Mr. and Mrs. William French."²⁰⁶ Mr. Stevenson's recommendation was unanimously approved.

Upon hearing the report of the Executive Committee, and realizing the damage that was being incurred within the church, Rev. Pritchard announced his resignation on October 9, and informed the congregation that January 1, 1893 would be his last day.²⁰⁷ On January 2, he accepted an invitation to serve as pastor of Tryon Street Baptist Church in Charlotte, which today is known as First Baptist. He served the Charlotte church until his death three years later.

What started as the beginning of a bright new era in the life of the church ended on a sour note. For nine years, Dr. Pritchard served the Wilmington congregation and Baptists across the country in a mighty way through his involvement in activities outside the church. In addition to the nearly five hundred members that were added to First Baptist Church during his pastorate, Dr. Pritchard served as chairman of the Board of Missions of the Baptist State Convention, associate editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, trustee of Wake Forest College, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville, Kentucky, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and lent his talents and interest to the establishment of North Carolina State University in Raleigh.²⁰⁸

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Life in Wilmington was progressing quickly as the nineteenth century was nearing its close. Transportation within the city was by horse-drawn street cars, while cargo steamers full of passengers plied the Cape Fear River up to Fayetteville. The Y.M.C.A. was organized; a new court house was built, and with an improved economy came the establishment of the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company. "Two outstanding evangelistic meetings were held in the warehouse of the Champion Compress Company at Walnut and Nutt streets."²⁰⁹ The first city crusade was the Pearson evangelistic meetings in 1888, and the second occurred in March of 1893, when evangelist Dwight L. Moody stopped in Wilmington for a series of worship services. Immanuel Presbyterian Church and Trinity Methodist Church were established as a result of the crusade. The erection of Grace United Methodist Church, Church of the Good Shepherd, and St. Matthew Lutheran churches also took place during these few years.

On January 9, 1893, the church called thirty-two year old William Benjamin Oliver as their next pastor, and he began his duties two months later. Like several other First Baptist pastors before him, Dr. Oliver was a graduate of Wake Forest College. He was reared in eastern North Carolina and came to Wilmington following four years of service as pastor of First Baptist in Fayetteville.²¹⁰ Several things stand out in perusing the church minutes during Dr. Oliver's five year stint in Wilmington. One of these was the restatement of strong resolutions concerning the duty of members in the matter of supporting the activities and finances of the church. It was reiterated that a just proportion of time, talents, and money was expected from every member of the congregation, and failure to put forth these things resulted in church discipline. As in days gone by, expulsion of members for failure to attend meetings, or keep commitments was a regular occurrence.

Another important event was the organization of the Southside Baptist Church that occurred in August of 1894. One of the last requests of longtime member Benjamin F. Mitchell, before his death in June, was that the church investigate the possibility of using the property at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Wooster Street for starting a new church. What began as The Wooster Street Chapel evolved into Wooster Street Baptist Church, later called the Missionary Baptist Church, and finally Southside Baptist Church when thirty-four members of the "mother church" were dismissed to form the new "daughter church."²¹¹ The deed to the property was given to the new church in 1897, after three years of continued growth on the part of the new work.²¹² In conjunction with this new beginning, the decision was made to sell the Old Ladies' Home at Fifth and Wooster Street in

order to finish the Lecture Room back at the corner of Fifth and Market Street. The room was completed in August of 1895.

The excitement surrounding the new work balanced the grief of losing Benjamin Mitchell. The resolution that appears as Appendix Seven was passed by the church. It demonstrated the love and respect the congregation had for the elder churchman that made First Baptist a top priority of his life.

Another significant event that happened during the pastorate of Dr. Oliver occurred in the spring of 1897. First Baptist Church hosted the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. Hundreds of Baptists from across the nation converged on Wilmington to report, plan, and celebrate what God was doing through their missionary effort. Wilmington's accessibility by boat and train, its proximity to area beaches, and the size of the First Baptist sanctuary made the city, and church, an attractive destination.

While things appeared to be going well within the Baptist family, there was an undercurrent of mistrust eroding away part of the foundation of the fellowship. Internal divisiveness reared its ugly head because of a lack of financial stability in the fall of 1897, and Dr. Oliver announced his resignation to take effect the following May. Minutes of the church reflect a lack of peace and trust within the church family between October of 1897 and May of 1898. Almost every resolution that was presented during this time period failed, including one such recommendation from J. W. Alderman that "only the male members shall have the right to vote on the calling or retaining of pastors."²¹³ The church was floundering with only about one hundred of the better than four hundred members making financial pledges to support the budget. The momentum created by the growth of the Southside Church seemed to be the only thing generating any type of enthusiasm within the mother church. Some wondered if they would be able to find a suitable pastor when Dr. Calvin S. Blackwell resigned from First Baptist Church in Elizabeth City and accepted the invitation of the Pastor Search Committee representing First Baptist of Wilmington in September of 1898. There was an understanding that he would begin his work on November 1.²¹⁴

Less than two weeks after Dr. Blackwell arrived in the port city, Wilmington experienced a catastrophe that has haunted the city to this day. "The famous political and racial incident that occurred in Wilmington on November 10, 1898, is, along with the subject of the Civil War, the most studied, researched and written about episode in local history."²¹⁵ The minutes

of the church are silent concerning the effects of the politically motivated takeover of the city by white Supremacists, but certainly their actions spilled over to the church.

The emancipation of African-Americans came to Wilmington on February 23, 1865, when a group of Union soldiers on horseback entered the city followed by a column of black foot soldiers after the fall of Fort Fisher. During the years of Reconstruction, many blacks came to the Cape Fear region causing the population of Wilmington to swell to twenty-five thousand people with African-Americans outnumbering Caucasian citizens by twenty percent.²¹⁶ By the mid-1880s, word had spread throughout the south that Wilmington was a place of opportunity for former slaves. "Cotton compresses, naval store businesses and lumber mills provided employment for former field hands."²¹⁷ When the African-Americans began to exercise their privilege to vote, they often elected black Americans to local leadership positions.

In 1897, for example, there were three blacks on the board of Aldermen, the city's most important elected body. Another black was a member of the powerful five-constituent board of audit and finance. Other public offices held by blacks included Justice of the Peace, deputy Clerk of Court, Superintendent of streets, and Coroner. The city had two black fire departments, and an all-black health board. To this list can be added a significant number of black policemen and, in federal patronage, the Mail Clerk and mail carriers.

The most conspicuous of President William McKinley's black appointees was John Campbell Dancy, named collector of customs at the Port of Wilmington in 1897. In addition to being black, and a non-native of Wilmington, he replaced a prominent white Democrat. Dancy's salary as collector of customs was approximately \$4000 per year, which was \$1000 more than the annual salary of the state's governor.²¹⁸

The *Daily Record* was the voice of African-Americans in Wilmington, and Alexander Manley was its editor. A series of editorials by Mr. Manley infuriated white Wilmington Democrats who had organized themselves into a White Government Union. After a local election held on November 8, 1898, white hysteria was at its peak. On November 9, an ultimatum called the "Wilmington Declaration of Independence" was presented to thirty-two African-American community leaders mandating the resignation of Alex Manley, and that he leave town; black employment be given to white citizens of the

city; and the Mayor and Board of Aldermen resign immediately.²¹⁹ The African-American leaders were given twelve hours to abide by the ultimatum or face the consequences. A written response was drafted by the leaders in which they agreed, "in the interest of peace we will most willingly use our influence to have your wishes carried out."²²⁰ Their response, however, did not arrive in time and the *Fayetteville Observer* reported:

Six hundred whites assembled at the intersection of Market and Fifth streets, and at 8:30 a.m. marched to the office of the *Daily Record* (South Seventh Street between Nun and Church streets beside St. Luke AME Zion Church), the negro newspaper, and destroyed all the material and the building (by fire). The streets of Wilmington are full of armed whites. At least a thousand will be on guard tonight. The column that moved on the *Record* was composed of the best citizens, including clergymen. By 11:30 a.m., the confrontation moved to the Brooklyn area (Fourth and Harnett streets) in the north side of town. Reports are that one white man was wounded and six blacks fell to a barrage of white gunfire. The Mayor and Board of Aldermen were forced to resign, and have been replaced by an all-white Board of Democrats. Quiet was restored by 4:00 p.m.²²¹

The next day the *Fayetteville Observer* reported, "Black leaders were escorted to the train depot, put on northbound trains and told if they ever reappeared in North Carolina they would be shot."²²² Fourteen hundred African-Americans were reported to have fled the city in the days that followed. "We have taken a city," Rev. Peyton H. Hoge boasted from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church. "To God be the praise."²²³

Wounds from that incident have continued to fester for the last hundred years and the scars continue creating adversarial racial relations from time to time. Race riots in the 1960s and 70s were particularly difficult on Wilmington with older African-Americans remembering and reminding about what happened in 1898. Though African-Americans make up less than twenty-five percent of the population of Wilmington, there are a vocal few who continue to remind city residents of the land and leadership roles that were stolen from them over one hundred years ago.

Dr. Blackwell, though new to Wilmington, and First Baptist Church, expressed his feelings concerning the November 10 racial riot. He was quoted in Raleigh's *News and Observer* as saying:

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Sometimes special emergencies arise when evil-doers become the common enemy of the community. The community must put forth its hand and execute justice at first hands. There is purification by breezes, but sometimes nature sees fit to use a whirlwind. The violence of the whirlwind may destroy some things, but who will say it was not good and needed, that it was not ordered by God. The fact that a few negroes were shot was a mere incident. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. The primary purpose was not to kill but to educate.²²⁴

It was reported that he told members of First Baptist Church that "God and the white-robed angels fought against the devil and his black-robed angels and God prevailed and banished the black leader and his deceived ones and there was peace in Heaven."²²⁵

Though he had his personal flaws and prejudices, Dr. Blackwell was said to have been an orator of the first rank. He grew up on a farm outside of Roanoke, Virginia and served in the Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War. During the days of Reconstruction, Calvin Blackwell traveled westward seeking a new beginning and found it in Des Moines, Iowa where he enrolled at Drake University for theological training.²²⁶ He returned to Virginia, in December of 1874, where he became pastor of a Disciples of Christ Church, in Norfolk. For the next seventeen years he traveled between New York, Chicago, and Augusta, Georgia where he pastored Christian Churches before becoming a Baptist in 1891.²²⁷

Dr. Blackwell's gift of preaching made him a delight to hear for the large crowds that responded to his pulpit presence. He was often sought after as a speaker for revival meetings and at convention gatherings. His evangelistic appeal was so effective that there were better than two hundred forty additions to the membership of First Baptist during his four years as pastor. When he resigned in 1903, First Baptist had a membership of better than four hundred, and all but ten of the members were a part of the Sunday School ministry. However, Dr. Blackwell was far more than a master in the pulpit. His respect among the teenagers lead the congregation to begin a new ministry of Christian service training called Baptist Young People's Union during his pastorate. The objective of this ministry was to assist teenagers in discipleship as they grew in grace, learned how to lead others into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and the weekly meetings cultivated a Christian social life among the young people. This was an ex-

tension of the "Youth's Missionary Society" that the church began in the early 1870s when the Baptist Foreign Mission Board began.

Dr. Blackwell's preaching caused the sanctuary to slowly begin to fill again after a couple of years of declining attendance, and with the increase in attendance came a new enthusiasm toward worship planning. In July of 1899, the Music Committee recommended that "Brother Ed. G. Woody be called as Choirmaster and Sister Elizabeth D. Buntt as Organist to lead our singers who are doing the best they can at giving acceptable service."²²⁸

An examination of the Church records during this time seems to indicate that George E. Leftwich, W.P. Oldham, and John Hanby (probably the same man who built the tall spire of the church, then purchased the house behind the church so he could admire his work and live within the shadow of the spire) were the persons primarily responsible for providing leadership among the laity of the church. These three men served as Superintendents of the Sunday School, as well as members of the Diaconate, Finance Committee, and Executive Committee. They carried a great deal of responsibility during the lean years when money was being borrowed to meet the financial demands of the church at the turn of the century. In October of 1899, it was reported by Brother Oldham that, "We find only 196 members paying anything to the support of the church. Of this number, 44 have kept their pledges paid in full to date—the remainder 152 is not keeping their pledges paid up. They owe the church a lot of money."²²⁹ He then proceeded to present what may be the boldest motion concerning finances ever brought before the congregation, and surprisingly it passed. The motion read as follows:

A list of all the members of the church to be put in a suitable frame—this to be placed in the vestibule of the church, showing amount pledged, amount paid, and the amount due by each, up to date of each monthly report. This will give each member a chance to see how his, or her, account stands without trouble or annoyance to any one.²³⁰

Four months later the Finance Committee met with the Discipline Committee and concluded that "about fifty members who are in arrears with their dues needed to be excused and that all delinquents had been notified."²³¹ Brother Leftwich then recommended that every member of the church be presented fifty-two envelopes and encouraged to use one each week for their offering. The recommendation passed, and the expectation was that members would give "something" each Sunday morning.

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In February of 1900, the congregation began to investigate the possibility of beginning a new church in the Delgado area of the city. Wilmington was expanding and new homes were being built along the east side of the city. A few weeks later a Sunday School was begun near the corner of Wrightsville and Gibson avenues. By October, the Sunday School had grown to the point that, "Brother S.G. Hall and Rev. Boney made interesting reports as to the mission work at Delgado and urged the necessity of a building and a church organization."²³² Rev. Boney was appointed to lead this new work on behalf of First Baptist Church and assured of the full support of the mother church. This work continued to expand and meets today as the Gibson Avenue Baptist Church.

Dr. Blackwell resigned early in 1903, to take the pastorate of First Baptist in Norfolk, Virginia, but his announcement did little to deter the energy he had generated. As in years past, the capable leadership of the laity kept the church going forward. In June of 1903, the church hired Miss Alice Brooks to serve as City Missionary for a six month period in hopes of having a pastor by the time her contract ended.²³³ Her responsibilities included visiting sick members, assisting with area Sunday Schools and welcoming visitors who may choose to worship with the First Baptist family. A committee was appointed to place new lights in the sanctuary. The ladies of the "Willing Workers" society reported that they intended to begin raising money to replace the side windows, and thought they would be successful in their task with the help of a few men in the congregation.²³⁴ In July of 1904, they began the task of replacing the windows in the sanctuary at a cost not to exceed seven hundred fifty dollars. The "Willing Workers" had almost four hundred dollars in hand at the time, but it would be a year before they could raise enough money to complete the project.²³⁵ After the new "art windows" were installed, the ladies went to work decorating the Lecture Room with new chairs, window treatments and carpet. By 1907, the ladies of the Baracca Sunday School class requested and received "exclusive control" of the room because of all the improvements they had made to it.²³⁶ Shortly thereafter they had new carpet installed in the sanctuary to replace the old carpet. The ladies were not just concerned about the interior of the building, however. Their constant complaints about the condition of the grounds led the men of the church to give the women sole responsibility for cutting the grass, pruning the trees and weeding the flower beds that surrounded the downtown edifice. The Southside Baptist Church was growing and needed additional space so they purchased the adjacent property of the "Old Ladies Home" from First Baptist.

Dr. Fred D. Hale assumed the pastorate in March, 1904 after serving as an Evangelist in Hot Springs, Arkansas for the previous year. Born in Alabama, Dr. Hale was educated at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville, Kentucky, where he served pastorates before moving to First Baptist in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1893.²³⁷ While there, he led the congregation in a growth spurt that resulted in a membership of better than twelve hundred members before a stark division arose over the sale and consumption of alcohol by its members. Dr. Hale was totally against such activities and after expressing his views, he resigned from the church and started the Third Baptist Church in Owensboro, in 1896. Before leaving this church five years later, Dr. Hale grew the infant congregation to better than one thousand members who worshipped in a newly-constructed sanctuary that sat about two thousand five hundred people comfortably.²³⁸

Dr. Fred Hale arrived in Wilmington with the reputation for being an excellent organizer and enthusiastic revivalist with a missionary spirit, but he struggled with bouts of depression after losing his second wife to death only a year earlier.²³⁹ After only a month on the field, Dr. Hale experienced a spell of nervous prostration and after a brief hospitalization, he considered resigning. However, the people of First Baptist recognized he needed to be ministered to rather than allowed to walk away emotionally weakened so they allowed him a two month leave of absence to rest and recuperate. Rev. Hale returned two months later to find a devoted group of laymen directing the congregation with John R. Hanby as Chairman of the Deacons, Alice Brooks ministering in the community, Brother A.H. Yopp directing the choir and leading worship services from the organ. The rested pastor quickly surmised, "I find the church in a most hopeful condition and the outlook for the future most encouraging."²⁴⁰ The church was averaging around four hundred for worship services and two hundred in Sunday School each week. The congregation was smaller than Dr. Hale's previous two pastorates, but the support rendered by members of First Baptist was what the pastor needed at that stage of his life.

One of the first orders of business for Dr. Hale was to organize an Advisory Board made up of the Chair of each ministry of the church. The Board met once a month and functioned as the Church Council to keep the pastor abreast of all the activities of the congregation. He, then expanded the neighborhood divisions the church had created several years earlier for the purpose of collecting money to meet its financial obligations. Rather than using the block captains to collect money, Dr. Hale challenged each member to find their niche in ministry and use it in their particular neighbor-

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hood. By the time he resigned in 1909, the neighborhood ministry had expanded to include twenty neighborhood sections in Wilmington, each with their own ministry captain.

Brother E.J. Edwards was hired as an Area Missionary for the newly formed Wilmington Baptist Association and Dr. Hale assisted him in beginning new churches in area townships like Maco in Brunswick County and Wallace and Burgaw. His zeal for missions was quickly becoming contagious within the church and they increased the amount of money they gave to Foreign Missions to five hundred dollars in 1904.²⁴¹ Three years later the amount had grown to twelve hundred dollars. Dr. Hale conducted a series of spiritual awakening meetings during the month of October and added seventy-nine new members, fifty-eight by baptism. A new room for Sunday School was erected that same month, and two years later it was expanded at a cost of nearly four thousand dollars.²⁴² First Baptist had made a wise decision in not allowing Dr. Hale to resign earlier in the year. The next few years would prove he was certainly capable of leading the church to attempt great things for the furthering of God's Kingdom.

By October of 1905, the membership of the church had grown to five hundred eighty with an average Sunday School attendance of more than two hundred thirty. The finances were stronger than they had been in years. Dr. Hale was spending one week each month leading revival meetings across North Carolina and serving as an adjunct Professor of Theology at Wake Forest College, but his time away from Wilmington was not hurting the work at First Baptist. In a report to the congregation in December of 1905, Dr. Hale wrote:

During the past month, there have been many tokens of God's presence with, and blessings upon us as a church. This has been indicated by the large congregations at the Sunday services, the notably felt presence and power of the Holy Spirit on several occasions, the liberality of the church in a financial way, the conversion of several people at the regular services, and increased interest in, and attendance upon the Sunday School. The outlook is most hopeful as from the Pastor's viewpoint; the church is in better condition than at any time.²⁴³

He was correct in his assessment. The additional Sunday School space was filled to overflowing the following February when better than four hundred attended.

The sudden increase in church membership prompted the pastor to ask for additional help by expanding the number of deacons from seven to fifteen. The budget was increased as giving escalated and the congregation expressed their appreciation to Dr. Hale by giving him a four hundred dollar raise in 1906, which brought his annual salary to two thousand four hundred dollars. The church was not providing a parsonage for their pastor during this time because the previous parsonage was sold years earlier and there had not been any mention of a new purchase. A neighborhood map of the church membership indicates that Dr. Hale resided at 609 Chestnut Street. Upon receiving word of his raise in salary, he remarked that he was "pleasantly surprised by the generosity of the congregation, and it was certainly needed because his living expenses were greater than what he was paid the previous two years."²⁴⁴

The report of the Wilmington Baptist Association in 1907, revealed that First Baptist continued to climb in all areas of ministry under Dr. Hale's pastorate. Brother E.L. Hawkins was sent out from the church with prayerful and financial support to organize a new mission at Wrightsville Sound. The total membership of the church had risen to over eight hundred, total contributions eclipsed ten thousand dollars for the year, the buildings looked better, inside and out, than they had ever looked. The interior lighting system of the sanctuary was converted from gas to electricity. In the words of its pastor, "all the departments of the church life and work are in flourishing conditions."²⁴⁵

November of 1907, found Rev. M.J. Ham of Kentucky leading a two week revival at First Baptist Church that realized almost one hundred additions. Fifty-four people confessed faith in Christ and were baptized. The excitement within the congregation spilled over into December when First Baptist hosted the annual meeting of the Baptist State Convention for the third time, but there was also a sense of sadness in the family. William A. French departed this world for his heavenly home as the church prepared for the celebration of the coming of the Christ child. This once trusted leader of the church who fell from grace and was maligned for a number of years before being restored to the fellowship of the church left a positive mark on the church for years to come. He was, but one, of a few leaders whose death merited a resolution. The following words reflect the legacy he left.

The church realizes the great loss sustained in the death of our esteemed brother. Joining the church, July 21, 1856, in his young manhood, his life was well spent in its service, and

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to him the church is largely indebted for much of its material prosperity and spiritual advancement, as he was always prominently engaged in all the activities of the church. We shall greatly miss his wise counsel and devoted service and tender to the bereaved family our sincere condolence, commending them in their sorrow to the abundant grace of our heavenly father.²⁴⁶

February of 1909, brought another ministry expansion of the church when First Baptist began exploring the possibility of establishing a mission Sunday School in the vicinity of Sixteenth and Market streets with George Leftwich and John Hanby guiding the effort.²⁴⁷ It would be several months before the new project actually got off the ground but once it did there was a ground-swell of support. The Sunday School eventually became a new church with First Baptist dismissing one hundred members to join members from other churches of the Wilmington Baptist Association to form what would become Temple Baptist Church, which today meets at Eighteenth and Market Streets, and also has a Christian Activity building at the corner of Seventeenth Street extension and George Anderson Drive.

Not only did the years Dr. Hale spent in Wilmington make a remarkable difference on First Baptist Church, but his influence was also felt in the city. His stands on prohibition made Wilmington a better place to live for all its citizens. In January of 1907, Pastor Hale organized an "Anti-Saloon League" whose objective it was to close every saloon in New Hanover County, and eventually all of North Carolina.²⁴⁸ While this writer does not know how personally effective Dr. Hale was at ridding the state of saloons, it is reported that better than sixty Wilmington saloons were closed on May 1, 1909, the day the prohibition amendment to the state constitution went into effect.²⁴⁹ Feeling his work in Wilmington was completed, Dr. Hale resigned the pastorate twenty-one days later to become pastor of McKinney Avenue Baptist church in Dallas, Texas. He would eventually return to North Carolina as pastor at First Baptist in Lexington, where he died in 1918.²⁵⁰

One month later, First Baptist received a special gift that continues to adorn our sanctuary to this day. The beautiful communion table that serves as a central piece of the sanctuary furnishings was presented to the church as a gift from Captain John F. Divine in memory of his wife, Augusta Elizabeth Divine in June of 1909. Captain Divine was the general superintendent of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad. A resolution was passed in receiving

the gift that read, "This rare and beautiful gift is to remain in the church for all time as a monument to the Christian life, and character of one who was for so many years, a true and faithful member of the First Baptist Church."²⁵¹

The resolution that the table should remain in the sanctuary for "all time" (and the fact that it has) is surprising because the name of Mrs. Divine, or her involvement in the actions of the church, seldom appears in records of the church. Whereas, the deacons were granted permission to place tablets in the church in 1902, to the memory of deacons George French, Benjamin Mitchell, L.B. Huggins, and Alfred Alderman, men who were incredibly devoted to the work of the church and made great sacrifices to see that its success would continue, but those tablets do not appear anywhere in the building today.

Dr. Joshua Hill Foster, Jr. assumed the pastorate of First Baptist Church on October 1, 1909, after serving pastorates in his home state of Alabama for the previous twenty-three years. Prior to accepting the invitation of the Wilmington Church, Dr. Foster visited the port city where he spent several days investigating the health of First Baptist.

On my visit to Wilmington I found the best organized church I had ever seen. Dr. Fred Hale had set up a well nigh perfect organization, and I determined to take advantage of what he had so wisely set in motion. He had taught the members of the church the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. He was an aggressive pastor, feeling that it was his duty—as far as was in his power—to line up his congregation on the side of right on whatever issues arose in the community.²⁵²

After witnessing a church that was ready to move forward, Dr. Foster embraced the challenge that was before him by continuing the evangelistic effort begun by Dr. Hale, expanding the Sunday School and local mission work of the congregation.

Dr. Foster's leadership began before he ever arrived in Wilmington through correspondence with the congregation. Their willingness to follow his direction was obvious from reading his remembrance of an early letter he received from church leaders seeking his opinion on an important internal issue. The following excerpt provided a glimpse into the growing music ministry.

The congregations in Wilmington were always good, and the singing was superb. Before I began my pastorate in Wilmington, the deacons wrote me and asked if I preferred a volunteer choir or a paid one. They said we could have a large chorus choir. I wrote back and suggested that we try the chorus, and after a while, if it did not work, we could go back to the paid quartette. When I came to Wilmington, a piano was put in the gallery opposite the organ. There were about a hundred voices who joined in the music, and it was uplifting and inspiring.²⁵³

There is no word as to where the large choir sang from during the worship services, but placing them in the sanctuary was not a problem for very long as Dr. Foster explained.

Miss Cannie Chasten was the organist and choir director. One day she made some suggestions which displeased some members of the choir, and on the next Sunday about forty of them stayed out. That was the beginning of a disintegration which brought the return of the paid quartette. When we replaced the chorus with the quartette, the organist was happy and everyone was well pleased.²⁵⁴

If this was seen as a blemish on the leadership capabilities of the new pastor, it would be one of the few failures he and the church experienced over the next five and one-half years.

In June of 1910, the deacons recognized the need to enlarge the Sunday School space in order to provide additional room for the children of the church. The decision was made to create this new space by digging a basement under the existing "Lecture Room" and auditorium that was already being filled to capacity each week. Dr. Foster's memoirs give us an idea of the dedication demanded to make the expansion possible (Appendix Eight).

Two months later, the deacons recommended that Miss Nettie King be hired to serve as City Missionary and assistant to the pastor. She was only nineteen years of age but was recognized as having a gift for visiting among the homebound members of the congregation. Miss King, who eventually was married to Mr. L.F. Gore, was paid twenty dollars a week to visit church members who were sick, elderly members who were unable to get to church, prospective members who were attending worship services or Sunday School, and to continue organizing the ever-growing Sunday School by

beginning new classes and departments as they were needed. Miss King was a great help to Dr. Foster who felt it vital that church members be visited regularly. His annual report of 1911 recorded better than one thousand four hundred visits with members of the church.²⁵⁵

After twenty-seven months as pastor, Dr. Foster convinced the congregation that greater things would be accomplished if he had additional help. Following his request, the church employed an assistant pastor. This time they hired M.O. Alexander, an assistant at the Y.M.C.A. Mr. Alexander was licensed to preach, and a month later ordained. He was "a general all round helper" to Dr. Foster, and his responsibilities also included that of a financial secretary.²⁵⁶ Interestingly enough, this assistant pastor had the distinct duty of making sure someone joined the church at every service because Dr. Foster felt it was imperative that each worship service should close with someone making a profession of faith in Christ, or at least transferring their membership to First Baptist Church. Mr. Alexander must have been successful at his work. Every church conference between the time he began and the time he resigned to attend the Moody Bible Institute in June of 1913, recorded new members joining the church.²⁵⁷ Upon his resignation, the church passed a resolution in his honor that read:

We commend Rev. M.O. Alexander as a young man of rare gifts and consecration; an earnest worker and successful soul winner. We pray the Great Head of the Church to prosper him in his college career and in whatever field of labor he may be called to work. We shall ever hold him in kindest remembrance for his work's sake.²⁵⁸

On the occasion of its One Hundred Twenty-fifth anniversary in 1933, Rev. Alexander sent a letter expressing his appreciation for the start he was given by First Baptist Church. His remarks included these words:

I am justly proud of my relationship with the church through a period of more than eight years. I was not only the first assistant pastor of First Church, Wilmington, but first to serve in that capacity among Baptist churches in North Carolina. The First Church took the lead in giving the pastor help. The W.M.U. of the First Church sent me to the Seminary at Louisville in 1913. It was from this church I was appointed Chaplain in the U.S. Navy in 1915. While I was serving as as-

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sistant to Dr. Foster, I organized the church at Winter Park Garden and was its first pastor. I organized the church at Delgado (now Gibson Avenue, I believe). I preached at Castle Hayne and Wrightsboro churches during this period also, and helped establish a mission at Farmers, some miles from Wilmington. My love abides and my prayers continue for the Great Old Church and her beloved and honored pastor.²⁵⁹

Rev. Alexander was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church in Thomasville, North Carolina at the time of this letter.

One month after receiving the resignation of Rev. Alexander, Miss Nettie King resigned her position as City Missionary, but at the same church conference in which she resigned, "Brother W.C. Peterson made a motion that arrangements be made for the ordination of Brother William M. Craig to the ministry."²⁶⁰ Two weeks later, he was ordained and became the new assistant pastor.

While Dr. Foster was at work, building the membership of First Baptist Church, these assistants worked diligently to keep the gospel expanding with the growth of the city. The Delgado Mission was solidified as a church, and in 1913, a new mission station was begun at Winter Park Garden as a result of their labor. Ninety-five years later, Winter Park Baptist Church is comparable in size, budget, mission interests, church polity and membership make up as its mother church. The similarities are amazing.

Dr. Foster's passion for evangelism and gift to recognize and set apart capable leadership from within the laity was equaled by his ability to motivate people to make sacrifices for the expansion of God's Kingdom. In the five and one-half years he served as pastor of First Baptist Church, there were better than nine hundred additions to the church and almost fifty thousand dollars given to mission causes. All indebtedness was paid and there were numerous enhancements to the building and grounds of the church. New sidewalks were placed around the church, tile was laid on the floor of the narthex, a new slate roof was installed on the sanctuary, a motor to replace the manual blower was installed for the organ, and the aforementioned expansion of the Sunday School space was constructed during Dr. Foster's pastorate. Also, in 1914, a marble baptistery was installed in the sanctuary as a gift from John and Joseph Hanby. Dr. Foster's remembrance of the need for a new baptistery appears as Appendix Nine.

First Baptist Church prospered greatly under the wise and capable leadership of Dr. Foster. Consequently, it was with great regret and sadness that

the congregation received his resignation on April 25, 1915, to become president of Bessie Tift College in Forsyth, Georgia, on August 1, 1915.²⁶¹ Before Dr. Foster and his family departed Wilmington, First Baptist Church passed a resolution (Appendix Ten) that expressed their love and appreciation for all he meant to the congregation.

Upon receiving Dr. Foster's resignation, a Pastor Search Committee consisting of Dan Penton, John Hanby, William T. Smith, H.C. Marshall, and W.C. Peterson was elected and began their work. It was decided that assistant pastor, Rev. Marshall Craig would serve as pastor in the interim, though he was also serving as pastor of the Winter Park church at the time. Somehow, Rev. Craig was able to fulfill the responsibility that was before him for the next year. Research into his career as a minister reveals the reason why.

Rev. Craig resigned the Wilmington churches to accept the pastorate of First Baptist in Kinston, North Carolina. After a stint of four years there, he moved to First Baptist in Petersburg, Virginia where he would serve for the next seven years before accepting a call to the Gaston Avenue Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Dr. Craig served the Dallas church, with distinction, for the next twenty-six years. During his tenure, more than thirteen thousand people joined the church, whose membership grew from eighteen hundred in 1927, to better than seven thousand before he retired in 1953, to devote his efforts to being a full-time Evangelist.²⁶² Dr. W. Marshall Craig also served as a trustee of Baylor University, Howard Payne College, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary at Wake Forest, and as Vice President of the Southern Baptist Convention, during his ministry in Texas. First Baptist Church of Wilmington, and Dr. J.H. Foster were fortunate to have such a leader as Marshall Craig to join them in their ministry.

The relationship between Dr. Foster and the congregation of First Baptist Church continued to grow over the years and miles that separated them. In 1933, at the age of seventy-two, Dr. Foster retired and returned to Wilmington. Upon his arrival he was honored with the distinction of becoming the first Pastor Emeritus of First Baptist Church.²⁶³ For the next fourteen years he supplied the pulpits of many churches in the Wilmington Baptist Association and was an active participant in the Pastor's Conference.

Dr. John Jeter Hurt left First Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, and became pastor of Wilmington's First Baptist Church in October of 1916.²⁶⁴ With a depleted staff, the congregation allowed him to bring along Mr. D.H. Wilcox who had capably served as his assistant for the pre-

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vious few years. Shortly after arriving in Wilmington, Dr. Hurt added Mr. W.B. Muse to the ministerial team. Mr. Muse served as financial secretary and office administrator. He and his wife were also a vital part of the music program. Music for the worship services was continuing to be led by a quartette at this time and Mr. and Mrs. Muse were two of the four singers. Miss Rose Godwin would also become a part of the church staff during the years Dr. Hurt guided First Baptist. Her responsibilities included working with the teenagers and children of the church. With a full, and capable, staff in place, and following the wave of momentum generated from the ministry of Dr. J.H. Foster, the future looked bright for the church. It was then that the world broke into war and all other things seemed insignificant. The church had numerous members who would go out to serve in the United States military over the next few years, though the number of casualties within the church family was minimal. Still, the impact of the war in Europe scarred America as most every family experienced the gamut of emotions that are brought on by the tension of war.

Dr. Hurt was a Virginian who was educated at the University of Richmond and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His seven years at First Baptist were a proverbial roller coaster as he guided the congregation through the dark days of the War, but also was fortunate enough to reap the blessing of the financial boom which followed. The church continued their outreach efforts by sponsoring the Seaside Assembly at Wrightsville Beach, while under his leadership.

The Harbor Island Auditorium was erected by the Tide Water Power Company and tendered to the Baptists for this purpose. Helpful informational and inspirational programs were skillfully arranged by Dr. Hurt and his able assistants. Large crowds came from various parts of the State to these meetings. However, after a few years, the Assembly had to be abandoned.²⁶⁵

Dr. Hurt's signature on First Baptist Church occurred in his guiding the congregation to plan and construct the existing Christian Education annex. In a church conference in August of 1920, a motion was made by L.F. Gore and duly seconded by William Struthers, Jr., that a contract be made between the church and L.H. Vollers for the construction of a new Sunday School building at an estimated cost of \$71,000. The recommendation was adopted.²⁶⁶

This was a huge undertaking for the church whose annual budget was less than fifteen thousand dollars.

The new building would serve as the first full educational complex the church ever had, but it would cost far more than seventy-one thousand dollars. As a matter of fact, in spite of the large amount of money that was given toward paying for the building as it was being erected, in February of 1922, just one month after the building was complete and Sunday School classes moved in, the church sold fifty thousand dollars worth of bonds in order to pay for the new construction.²⁶⁷ This was money well-spent because the new building not only provided space for the existing needs of the Sunday School ministry, but also enough room to house the Sunday School and Christian Education activities for many years to come. Dr. Hurt remarked that “the new building had seventy rooms, one being the basement level fellowship hall named ‘Fireside Hall’ because it contained a fireplace.”²⁶⁸ Many of these rooms must have been small because the building has been renovated twice since being erected and today there are only thirty-five rooms. None of the rooms are very large. There was also a rooftop garden that was used for church-wide socials, according to church records. The garden was created on the flat roof above the west side of the third floor such that it over-looked the downtown area. Members of the sixth grade Sunday School class continue to enjoy this space by going out onto the roof for their class time when weather permits.

Dr. Hurt announced his resignation just nineteen months after the dedication of the new Sunday School Annex. Feeling a call to the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Tennessee, Dr. Hurt left Wilmington, along with Mr. and Mrs. Muse, but left behind Rev. Wilcox to serve as interim pastor. During his seven year tenure, Dr. Hurt provided the guidance needed to complete a building campaign, welcomed approximately one thousand new members into the church, assisted in solidifying the start of Temple Baptist Church, and led the congregation to begin a weekly newsletter, and seven new Baptist Young People’s Union groups. In announcing his resignation he said:

Seven years and three months ago the Star of my hopes stood still above yonder high-pointing steeple and lighted the path of duty for me beneath it. I then took up the task which has proven both difficult and delightful. Today that guiding Star seems to be moving westward. Where it leads, I will follow.

To go means the severance of relationships as precious as anywhere bind pastor and people together. The memory of

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these ties will cheer me until life's little day is lost in the gathering shadows. And, the fond hope of forming them again in the land eternal will be an ever present inspiration.²⁶⁹

After giving nine years of service to First Baptist Church of Jackson, Tennessee, Dr. Hurt was elected president of Union University in that same city. He held that position until he was elected as acting president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Hurt also served as vice-president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1935.

Rev. D. H. Wilcox lead First Baptist for the next eleven months by receiving more than fifty new members and guiding the congregation to pay down an additional ten thousand dollars toward the debt on their new building. In July of 1924, he resigned to accept the position of Assistant Pastor at First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.²⁷⁰ However, the resignation did not take effect until September 1, the day on which Rev. J. Marcus Kester came to serve as the new pastor.

The landscape of Wilmington had undergone many changes over the last fifty years, as had First Baptist Church. Social, political, and technological advancements catapulted the church into a new century with numerical and financial growth. The organizational skills of Dr. Hale and pastoral tenderness of J.H. Foster combined with the enthusiasm of new members who continued the commitment of past lay leaders made First Baptist one of the strongest churches in North Carolina. Their resilience, devotion to God and commitment to missions formed a strong foundation that served as a rudder that guided this movement of God. First Baptist spawned numerous other churches since its early days on Baptist Hill and its future was brighter than any sunrise that ever emerged over the Atlantic Ocean.



The original Baptist Meeting House on Baptist Hill is located at 305 South Front Street. Worship services, Sunday School and meetings of the church were held in this house until 1866. The house serves as a residence today.



The French brothers (from left: Job B. French, George R. French, Asa P. French and Stephen A. French) in 1882. George R. French carried First Baptist Church on his shoulders during its formative years and was responsible for leading the church to purchase the property at the corner of Fifth Avenue & Market Street, selecting the architect, choosing the model and approving the design of the existing sanctuary and was responsible for the majority of the fundraising to build it. He enlisted the assistance of his brothers in developing financial support from churches and individuals in the north, primarily their home state of Massachusetts.

HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND MEMORIES

PLAN	NUMBER	VALUATION	PENS	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH - WILMINGTON, N.C.
20				
19	100	50		
18	25	250		
17		200	75	
16	30	400		
15		150	100	
14	50	450		
13		300	125	
12	75	420		
11		300	125	
10	50	400		
9		250	100	
8	40	300		
7		200	75	
6	25	150		
5		100	50	
4	20	100		
3		50	25	
2	10	50		
1		25	10	
30		200	100	
29		300	200	
28		400	300	
27		500	400	
26		600	500	
25		700	600	
24		800	700	
23		900	800	
22		1000	900	
21		1100	1000	
20		1200	1100	
19		1300	1200	
18		1400	1300	
17		1500	1400	
16		1600	1500	
15		1700	1600	
14		1800	1700	
13		1900	1800	
12		2000	1900	
11		2100	2000	
10		2200	2100	
9		2300	2200	
8		2400	2300	
7		2500	2400	
6		2600	2500	
5		2700	2600	
4		2800	2700	
3		2900	2800	
2		3000	2900	
1		3100	3000	

This photograph of the original seating plan of the pews in the sanctuary shows the rental amount and the numbering of the pews. Pews were rented annually as a way to pay off the original debt incurred when the sanctuary was built.



This view of the exterior of the sanctuary in 1900 is one of the earliest photographs of the 138-year-old sanctuary.

HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND MEMORIES



The Marshall Craig Baptist Young Peoples Union (BYPU) discipleship group is shown seated on the steps of the east entrance (corner of Fifth Avenue) to the sanctuary in 1915.



An adult Sunday School class is pictured sitting on the steps of the church sanctuary in 1916.



The Primary Sunday School Department poses for a photo in 1920.



The Children's Sunday School Department gathered for a social in the fellowship hall in 1923.

HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND MEMORIES



Reverend Dr. John Jeter Hurt (in long coat)) is flanked by an adult Sunday School class on the front steps of the sanctuary in 1923.



This house at 117 South Fourth Street served as the parsonage from 1924 until 1950. Dr. J. Marcus Kester and his family (10 children) lived in this house until his untimely death in 1936. A new parsonage was purchased by the church at 15 Forest Hills Drive in 1950 which served as the home of Reverend Randolph Gregory and his family until his retirement in 1975.



The Freeman Sunday School class is pictured in this photo from 1948. Many of these women led the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) activities of the church.



Organist/Choir Master Henry Emurian (center) is flanked by the Chancel Choir in the original choir loft.

HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND MEMORIES



Pictured is the interior of the sanctuary in 1950.



A Girls In Action (GA) Coronation was held in the sanctuary in 1965.



Activities Center in 2008 after renovation and expansion.



This view shows the sanctuary with the exposed damage to the tall spire after Hurricane Fran in 1996. This photograph was published in numerous national newspapers to show the severity of the winds of the storm.

CHAPTER FOUR



A Heritage of Hope through Social Unrest And Racial Tension

Dr. J. Marcus Kester was a native North Carolinian who received degrees from Wake Forest and Newton Theological Seminary, though he also studied at Harvard, Oxford, and Glasgow, Scotland. Prior to coming to Wilmington, Dr. Kester served as pastor of First Baptist churches in Wilson, North Carolina, Shelby, North Carolina, and for two years as educational secretary of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.²⁷¹ From the day of his arrival in Wilmington, until the day his body was laid to rest in Oakdale Cemetery in 1936, Dr. Kester gave his all to the church family of First Baptist Church.

Described as “unpretentious, quiet, scholarly, a gentleman in every sense of the word,” J. Marcus Kester was loved and appreciated for his sense of conviction and steady approach to guiding the congregation to be a living example of Christ’s love.²⁷² Cooperation, trust, harmony, and unity were characteristics that Dr. Kester instilled in the church. He constantly stressed the importance of “spirituality in living and stewardship in giving.” As a result of these guiding principles, the congregation chose to begin a nominating committee process whereby a committee was elected to nominate the officers of the church, along with thirty-three deacons, and thirty-three deaconesses (women whose responsibility it was to assist the male deacons). These sixty-six members served as ministers in their neighborhoods, while a “Board of Deacons,” consisting of fifteen men served as the administrative decision-makers for the congregation.²⁷³

The nominating committee consisted of three men and two women. The standing committees of the church at this time included the following: Finance, Music, Pulpit, Lord’s Supper, Audit, Baptismal, House, Ushers,

Publicity, Membership, Grounds, and Flowers. In addition to the worship services and Sunday School, the church also had the following ministries: Music, Youth, Children, Women's Missionary Union, and monthly gatherings for men. To these activities was added the "Church Night Studies" that occurred each Wednesday evening beginning in 1926.

It is not surprising that the church decided to begin having women in elected positions at this time. The inclusion of women on the boards of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention began in 1918. The nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was ratified in August of 1920. One year later, a committee of the Baptist State Convention constitution recommended the elimination of language restricting representation at the annual session to males.²⁷⁴ Had it not been for the commitment of women to the work of First Baptist Church and all other Baptist associations and conventions, few of them would have survived. Women were now getting the opportunity to be recognized for the leaders they were.

Dr. Kester's passion for supporting global mission causes was obvious by his employment by the Foreign Mission Board prior to moving to Wilmington. His love for, and commitment to mission work was matched by First Baptist's history of supporting missionaries from its earliest meetings in 1808. The zealous pastor faced no opposition when he encouraged the congregation to designate at least one-third of its annual budget to mission causes outside of Wilmington. The church would continue this practice for many years, even in the face of financial hardship. Evidence of the legacy of sacrificial giving continued to live within the church. Records indicate Ernest Kolk, the Educational Director, refused a raise in salary in order to secure that First Baptist could send more money to the work of global missions.²⁷⁵ Though Mr. Kolk resigned his post later in the year, the congregation felt it imperative that they continue having someone in place to direct the Christian Education ministry of the church. Rev. John A. Neilson was called to this position in October, 1927, at a salary of two thousand one hundred dollars.²⁷⁶ Dr. Kester was paid four thousand eight hundred dollars, annually. The church also employed Mary Hanby as Financial Secretary. Mrs. Lila Head was serving the church as organist at this same time, but would only accept a small salary for the part she played in leading worship. A paid quartette consisting of Ella Belle Futrelle, Mrs. Armistead Mercer, Mr. Snakenburg, and Mr. Cheek divided one hundred twenty dollars each month for leading in choral music.²⁷⁷

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One of the first goals set by Dr. Kester was to eliminate the debt incurred by the church when it erected the educational building. He was aware of the fifty thousand dollars in bonds that were sold, and that they were to mature in 1927. When March, 1927, arrived, the church had paid all its notes, twenty-three thousand dollars was paid toward the fifty thousand dollars in bonds that were sold, and the church prepared and sold an additional twenty-seven thousand dollars in new bonds that were to be paid over the next three years. First Baptist was therefore, free of all debt on April 1, 1930.²⁷⁸ This was an amazing feat considering that the days of America's economic depression was staring the church in the face.

Names that frequently appear in leadership roles during this era were Mr. and Mrs. J.D. Vann, Mr. and Mrs. J.R. Hanby, Dan Penton, Dr. W.T. Smith, D.L. Dobson, W.H. McEachern, Claud Efird, B.V. Sunofsky, Nellie Pickard, and Bessie Ruth Lathrop. Members of the "Board of Deacons" were A.M. Baldwin, D.C. Marshall, D.L. Dobson, H.A. Hanby, S.B. Tabb, Dan Penton, J.A. Orrell, F.T. Allen, J.L. Baldwin, R.H. Brady, E.B. Josey, J.D. Vann, W.C. Peterson, J.R. Hanby, W.T. Smith, and J.F. Warwick.²⁷⁹ These deacons were elected to serve terms of three years at the time according to the church by-laws. If a vacancy occurred prior to an election, the deacons chose a replacement. Dr. Sankey Blanton led the deacons to change the by-laws in 1945, whereby a rotation system was put into place which allowed more persons the opportunity for service in this position of responsibility. The number of deacons remained at fifteen but they were annually elected five at the time, and served for three years before having to rotate off for one year before becoming eligible for re-election.

Financial stress was rearing its head across America and the Cape Fear region was not immune in the early 1930s. Still, First Baptist Church kept the course of providing significant support for global mission causes, leadership within the Wilmington Baptist Association, and security for its pastor. Now debt-free, the congregation sought a suitable house for its pastor and his family of ten children. Many years had passed since the church owned a parsonage, but with financial demands affecting everyone, the idea of providing a home for its pastor seemed prudent. In October, 1930, the church purchased a house at 117 South Fourth Street, for thirteen thousand dollars that would serve as the new home of Dr. Kester and his family.²⁸⁰ The Finance Committee also recommended an increase in salary to show appreciation for their pastor, but he refused it due to the terrible shape of the national economy. The congregation abided by his wishes and followed his suggestion of "keeping the course," when one year later they

unanimously approved resolutions committing themselves to fulfilling similar desires of their founding fathers and mothers (Appendix Eleven).

Believing critical days were ahead for his church and nation, Dr. Kester proposed that copies of the church covenant be made available to every member of the church so they could read it in unison on the first Sunday of each month as an act of worship and a reminder of the high goals to which they had pledged themselves. The congregation approved its pastor's recommendation and responded by giving eighty-five percent of the \$20,000 budget during a time that few organizations were financially able to survive. Though the Wilmington church was only the eighteenth largest Baptist church in the state, in size of membership, it was second in gifts to missions for that year.²⁸¹

The budget for 1933 was reduced by two thousand dollars to \$18,000 to reflect the shortage for the previous year. Again, the congregation gave but eighty-five percent of the budget so it was reduced to sixteen thousand dollars, with one-third going for mission causes in 1934. The *Kingdom News* newsletter was reduced from a weekly publication to monthly. The salary paid to the quartette was lowered and their contract was reduced to leading music in worship services for eight months annually rather than twelve. The pastor's salary was lowered by one thousand dollars. The church did, however, grant Dr. Kester a three month leave of absence during the summer in order for him to "tour the Holy Lands, witness the Passion Play and attend the Baptist World Alliance annual meeting in Berlin."²⁸² Dr. J. H. Foster, the Pastor Emeritus, filled the pulpit in the absence of the pastor. The budgeted needs were met that year so members of the Finance Committee increased the budget by four thousand dollars in 1935, in hopes that better days were ahead. Little did they know that one of the greatest challenges they ever faced was less than one year away.

Dr. Kester became critically ill in late February of 1936. After being confined to his home for better than a month, he was admitted to James Walker hospital with a diagnosis of pneumonia. Dr. Bertram Williams remembered the death of Dr. Kester and the advancements made in medical science since then. "Antibiotics to treat illnesses like pneumonia had not yet been discovered in the 1930s."²⁸³ On the morning of April 1, after weeks of anxiously waiting and praying for God to spare his life, the forty-eight year old man who had pastored First Baptist longer than any other, exchanged his earthly mantle for an incorruptible heavenly home. For the past eleven and one-half years, Dr. Kester and the First Baptist family had climbed many mountains together, faced dark days with the confidence and hope of the

light of Jesus Christ, and thought they had overcome life's greatest challenges. Now, the responsibility for ministering to those in need was placed squarely on the congregation, whose duty it was to support the wife and children of the one who had previously comforted them in their time of need.

The high esteem in which the congregation and community held Dr. Kester was evidenced by the newspaper articles, resolutions that were passed, and the throngs that gathered for the celebration and remembrance of his life. The funeral was conducted by Dr. J.H. Foster, Dr. William H. Milton (rector of Saint James Episcopal Church at the time) and the pastor of Temple Baptist Church, Dr. Arthur J. Burton. The service was held at First Baptist and the interment in Oakdale Cemetery.

First Baptist Church expressed their deepest sympathies and support for the bereaved family by daily visits with family members, weeks of providing meals and the establishment of a fund that was used to pay the medical bills incurred during the extended illness of Dr. Kester, and all funeral expenses. The congregation also provided a gift of seventy-five dollars per month to the Kester family and allowed Mrs. Kester and her children to continue living in the parsonage until such time as it was needed by the church.²⁸⁴ The financial assistance was continued for five years.

As in the unexpected death of Rev. John Lamb Prichard, so it was with the death of Dr. J. Marcus Kester. First Baptist Church and the city of Wilmington lost a dearly loved and respected Christian leader whose guiding influence directed a wandering people through some of the most difficult days in the history of the church and the city.

First Baptist Church had grown to a membership of better than eleven hundred and had more than seven hundred people enrolled in Sunday School, but settled itself into the grip of grief and mourning in the days following the death of their pastor. The hope instilled by the stabilizing leadership of Dr. Kester began to lapse into but a glimmer as the church trudged through the doldrums of emotional and economic depression. The congregation was fortunate to have its Pastor Emeritus, Dr. J.H. Foster, to once again assume its pulpit and pastoral responsibilities during some of the most tumultuous days in its history.

In July of 1936 (three months after the death of Dr. Kester), Dr. Sankey Lee Blanton accepted the call to become the next pastor of the emotionally exhausted congregation. At only thirty-nine years of age, the scholarly Dr. Blanton who had the reputation for being a marvelous orator who showed a marked interest in all people and evinced a depth of compassion peculiar to few others was just what the Wilmington church needed.

Reared in a tiny farming community in Rutherford County, North Carolina, young Mr. Blanton traded a plow for an education that included degrees from Wake Forest, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Andover Newton Theological School and Harvard University. He was serving as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New Haven, Connecticut, at the time he accepted the call to First Baptist Church. The Calvary church was made up of students and faculty members of Yale University, which was adjacent to the campus. Rev. Olin T. Binkley, who would later become a pastor in Chapel Hill, and eventually serve as President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, was his associate pastor. After announcing his resignation to the Calvary church, Dr. Blanton penned a letter to the Wilmington congregation that included the following words.

I am humbly conscious of the great traditions of consecrated Christian ministry into which I will enter as your pastor. It is my earnest prayer that the Spirit may enable me also to serve worthily as an ambassador of Christ while I am among you. May the blessings of God be upon our cooperative efforts in His name.²⁸⁵

Dr. Blanton arrived on September 15 knowing quite well that his primary agenda for the first several months would be to provide counsel, support and encouragement to a congregation in mourning. However, his pastoral care began before he ever left Connecticut by inviting Mrs. Kester's son, Truett, to spend the summer in the Blanton home with him and Mrs. Blanton, and their twelve year old son. Mrs. Kester and her son accepted the offer, and before the summer ended Dr. Blanton sent a letter to Mrs. Kester offering her the opportunity to continue living in the church parsonage at his expense during this time of transition for her and her family (Appendix Thirteen). Mrs. Kester accepted Dr. Blanton's generous offer and chose to remain in the parsonage on South Fourth Street for another year while Dr. and Mrs. Blanton rented a home on Third Street. This act of kindness solidified his standing with the Kester family, and offered a preview of Dr. Blanton's attitude of care that characterized his ministry in Wilmington.

When Dr. Blanton arrived in Wilmington he found an experienced paid staff that consisted of Mrs. Mary Hanby, financial secretary; and Mrs. Lila Head, organist. A paid quartette was still leading the congregational singing but there was no one directing the Christian Education ministry. Two devoted members of the laity were serving admirably in the areas of Youth

Ministry—Robert LeGwin, and the promotion of missions—Mrs. John Stevens. The “Young Peoples Work” was one of the best in the state with an average attendance of better than one hundred teenagers involved in weekly discipleship studies.²⁸⁶ The Woman’s Missionary Society had an enrollment of one hundred sixty-nine. This team of professionals and volunteers held the congregation together as they journeyed through the “valley of death.” In an attempt to help the church move beyond their grief and look to a world that desperately needed what First Baptist had to offer, Dr. Blanton invited the Baptist State Convention to come to Wilmington for their annual convention in November of 1937. This proved to be the highlight of the year for a church that was beginning to look beyond the darkness of despair.

As the church was healing from the loss of its beloved Dr. Kester, the angel of death paid a second visit to First Baptist Church. This time it was Daniel Penton, a trusted layman who held every leadership position the church offered. Like George French, Benjamin Mitchell, C. D. Ellis, and Alfred Alderman before him, Mr. Penton was another one in a long line of committed members of the laity whose devotion to Christ, and his church served as a source of strength, stability and security in days when the church was with, or without a pastor. After his death, in March of 1939, the congregation approved the memorial statement that appears as Appendix Fourteen.

In April of that year, though the annual budget had not been increased in three years, the church followed the recommendation of Dr. Blanton by hiring Miss Helen Smith at a salary of fifteen hundred dollars a year. Miss Smith directed the Music Ministry and assisted the pastor in planning worship services. A year later the church selected a committee to begin studying the possibility of replacing the existing organ. In June of 1941 the Board of Trustees approved the purchase of a new four manual organ that contained two thousand eight hundred pipes. The cost of the organ was ten thousand dollars, six thousand of which was provided as a down payment, the other four thousand would be paid by the end of the year.²⁸⁷ With the installation of the new organ, the pastor and Miss Smith encouraged the development of a volunteer choir which began the following fall.

In September, Dan Penton, Jr., walking in the footsteps of his father, presented a recommendation that the church purchase new lighting fixtures for the sanctuary. The price quoted was two thousand six hundred dollars. The congregation unanimously approved the recommendation and the new fixtures were in place by December.²⁸⁸

The October meeting of the deacons brought a recommendation that the Baptist State Convention be petitioned to explore interest in establishing a church in the vicinity of Sunset Park.²⁸⁹ Shipbuilding was on the rise with the approach of World War II and the population of Wilmington was escalating as families relocated to the port city in search of employment at the ship yard. A report from the superintendent of the Sunday School revealed there were more than four hundred fifty people in attendance each week. Deacon B.V. Sunofsky, representing the Baptismal Committee, reported there had only been fifteen baptisms in the last twelve months and attributed the decline as compared to previous years to, "the fact that folks today don't get 'Old Time Religion' like they once did."²⁹⁰ Mr. W.A. Whitney was recognized for being an usher for fifty years. Dr. Blanton reported, "We have had one of the best years in the history of the church, with the possible exception of baptisms, and he looked forward to the future with confidence, courage and a great deal of faith."²⁹¹ And, well he should.

First Baptist Church gave more than thirty-four thousand dollars in offerings with seven thousand five hundred dollars going to mission causes. The congregation also established a Fellowship Fund that was used to meet the financial needs of poor individuals living within the area. They assisted approximately one hundred fifty in the first twelve months. Names that appeared often in the list of church leaders as 1941 came to a close were Miss Helen Dobson, Howard Hanby, C. Heide Trask, Mr. and Mrs. J.G. Middleton, Mr. and Mrs. John Stevens, Miss Margaret Russ, Mr. and Mrs. J.C. Roe, L.F. Gore, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Williams, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Cameron, Mr. and Mrs. J.D. Freeman, and Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Boney. The pastor's enthusiasm was spilling over to the congregation as they were emerging from the economic and emotional depression that plagued them since the death of Dr. Kester. Little did they know what December would bring with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into World War II.

The guns of war now silenced the rampant rumors of an invasion. The United States was swept into the maelstrom of a global war and the effects were felt and seen in this port city. A sudden influx of people serving in the military, the government, and ship building caused Wilmington's population to mushroom from thirty-five thousand to nearly one hundred thousand by the end of the war. The city had grown by fewer than five hundred people in the previous twenty years. The United States government planned and developed new neighborhoods for the thousands of workers they were sending to southeastern North Carolina. One such neighborhood was Lake Forest where almost five hundred duplex houses were built. Frances Chap-

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pell has lived at Lake Forest since its earliest days. She said, "I often reflect on the many young children that grew up along the shores of Greenfield Lake. There were more than three hundred children in the Lake Forest defense housing area in 1942."²⁹² Without a nearby church to evangelize and provide discipleship opportunities for the children, First Baptist began entertaining the question of how transportation could be supplied to enable the children to attend Sunday School.²⁹³ When a solution could not be found, the church began a satellite ministry to the neighborhood. This mission would eventually become a free-standing church that today goes by the name of Lake Forest Baptist.

Sunset Park is another neighborhood that developed quickly around the days of World War II because of its close proximity to the shipyard. The Baptist State Convention and Wilmington Baptist Association provided the foundation for a church in that neighborhood in 1941, at the urging of the deacons of First Baptist. By October of 1942, the new work was growing quickly so First Baptist began formulating plans to raise three thousand dollars to help in the construction of the newly formed Baptist church.²⁹⁴ A Letter from Rev. James H. Butler, pastor of the Sunset Park church, dated January 4, 1944 shows their appreciation.

The year 1943 has made its path across our lives leaving an indelible impression of all the good things we have enjoyed. When we pause to give thanks for all our blessings we cannot help but mention the kindness of you people of the First Church. Our hearts are filled with gratitude in your behalf. May we express in the highest superlatives our deep appreciation for your gifts, cooperation and prayers during 1943.

We hope to occupy our new building within a month. We are looking forward to the warmest ties of friendship and fellowship with the First Church.²⁹⁵

Church membership and contributions rapidly increased as did activities around the mother church. Wilmington became a serviceman's playground on the weekends as many soldiers came to the coast for recreation at the beach, socials at the U.S.O., and worshipping with the downtown churches. Dick Gough recalled having to get to the Y.M.C.A. early in the day on Saturday in order to reserve a bed for the night. He told of evenings in Wilmington when the city was so overcrowded with servicemen that they slept on the ground, in area parks and in the median along Market Street.²⁹⁶

Members of First Baptist felt it was a worthwhile project to open their heart and doors to these men who were serving their country in the military, so cots were purchased and arrangements made for Fireside Hall to be opened as a large Saturday night bedroom and breakfast was served to the men before worship service on Sunday mornings. The hospitality of the congregation and the powerful presence of Dr. Blanton caused the sanctuary of First Baptist Church to fill each Sunday. The eloquence of the Baptist pastor's sermons was not the only thing that drew crowds to the church. He may have performed more weddings than any other pastor in town.

In 1942, the choir director and organist resigned their posts creating a void in the music ministry that was felt for only a short time. Mrs. Lila Head retired after serving as organist for twenty-five years. Some Sundays she played while her sons, Tom and Emerson sat on either side of her on the organ bench. The church decided to take a chance on combining these two positions when they hired a young man named Henri Emurian who was a master organist. For the next nine years he shaped the course of the music department of First Baptist Church by creating an atmosphere of professionalism in everything he directed or performed. The volunteer choir became one of the finest in the state.

People across the city came to First Baptist in order to hear Mr. Emurian play the organ. Mrs. Peggy George told of being a Methodist until the day her husband Lucius visited First Baptist and heard Henri play. That day, Mr. George determined he would worship no where else but First Baptist. The Georges became Baptists shortly thereafter, and Lucius has played the piano for various gatherings of the church, including worship services ever since.²⁹⁷ A highlight of the Advent season at First Baptist Church occurs on the Sunday before Christmas. Lucius George provides a piano concert in the sanctuary during the Sunday School hour that day. It is his gift to the congregation and the sanctuary is often filled to capacity. Mrs. George says, "Lucius has been providing the Christmas concert for over fifty years."²⁹⁸

Henri Emurian is somewhat legendary in the music annals of this historic church, particularly among the forty members who have called First Baptist "their church" for better than sixty years. The worship services he directed, weddings and funerals he played for, and concerts and recitals he performed continue to be remembered fondly. It was Henri who organized and directed the Wilmington Choral Society, which in conjunction with the Wilmington Orchestra built a reputation for providing incredible performances in the Cape Fear region.

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The year October 1941 to September 1942, closed with the congregation contributing more than twenty eight thousand dollars in undesignated offerings and better than ten thousand dollars of it went to mission causes. Church records indicate the transfer of a number of members who were called into the armed services but fortunately there was only one reported casualty within the church family. Dr. Tom Head recalls the Sunday worship services during World War II that ended with the congregation standing at attention while Henri Emurian played the national anthem prior to the pronouncement of the benediction.²⁹⁹

The annual church letter to the Wilmington Baptist Association for the year ending September of 1943 noted a First Baptist membership of nearly fifteen hundred. Baptisms were taking place on the last Sunday of every month. Gifts of better than forty-one thousand dollars were reported. Over sixteen thousand dollars was given to mission causes. In addition to the contributions to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program, the church also supported Bible teaching in the local schools, Wake Forest College, Campbell College, and Meredith College, Baptist Children's Homes, Baptist Hospital, new churches at Sunset Park and Carolina Beach, and Chinese and Russian relief efforts.³⁰⁰ The report for the following year was almost identical.

On November 7, 1943, Sunday School attendance exceeded five hundred (513) for the first time in the history of the church. The average attendance for the year was reported as four hundred twenty-two, of the eight hundred sixty who were enrolled. In the midst of these encouraging numerical gains, Sunday School Superintendent, R.H. Youngblood reported, "This has been a very hard year; a peculiar one; one in which we have more or less adjusted ourselves to all out war."³⁰¹ Little changed in most of the numbers at First Baptist over the next twelve months, but there was a noticeable decrease in Sunday School attendance. Mr. Youngblood revealed the reason why: "In spite of the Polio ban our Sunday School has kept a relatively good average attendance of three hundred eighty-one."³⁰² This polio ban prevented children in Wilmington from participating in Sunday School during the month of August, 1944.

An important member of Dr. Blanton's staff was Miss Ellen Ray, who served as director of religious education until her resignation in May of 1945.³⁰³ She left Wilmington to assume the same position at First Baptist in Hickory, N.C. With her departure came an immediate decrease in Sunday School attendance which had a negative affect on the finances of the church. The bulk of the financial contributions to the church were com-

ing from a small percentage of the membership. While the financial health of the church could be maintained by this small group of committed givers, the Finance Committee pointed out the unhealthy condition of the church when too few members were carrying the majority of the burden for the entire church. Dr. Blanton challenged all the members by reminding them of those who came before them. If the church intended to continue going forward it would be essential that they do so as a body of believers, not as individuals.

In the fall of 1945, Leslie Boney, an architect and member of the church, presented drawings of an expansive building project called the "Greater Church Building Program."³⁰⁴ The approved idea was that any expansion or renovation would be undertaken as financial conditions permitted. The hope was that there would be need for additional space and the financial resources to provide for expansion rather quickly. A building fund was established and almost twenty-five thousand dollars was contributed. One quarter of this money came from the estates of the late R.L. Fox (six thousand dollars) and Mrs. Mary Duguid (one thousand dollars).

Just as momentum was being generated, Dr. Blanton tendered his resignation in April of 1946.³⁰⁵ The offer to become Dean of the religion department at Wake Forest College was one that Dr. Blanton felt he was called to accept. In doing so, he gave the Wilmington congregation five months notice and assured them of his assistance in helping them select his successor. On July 8, Rev. Charles A. Maddry accepted the call to become the next pastor of First Baptist Church. Dr. Blanton's last Sunday was the second Sunday in September, his tenth anniversary as pastor. After several years at Wake Forest, he moved to Chester, Pennsylvania to become president of Crozer Theological Seminary. Dr. Blanton returned to Wilmington in his retirement years and died there in June of 1974.

At thirty-eight years old, Rev. Maddry assumed a responsibility greater than he had ever faced. Having grown up in Durham, he was returning to his home state after serving as pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky for the previous three and one-half years. Charles Maddry was graduated from Mars Hill, Wake Forest, and received a master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before studying at Yale University and graduating from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville.³⁰⁶ He was a first-rate preacher having won numerous oratory awards but it was not his preaching that stood out during his short tenure as pastor of First Baptist Church. Rev. Maddry thought organizational changes were needed and he implemented several of them rather quickly.

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Rev. Maddry recognized the need to make adjustments to the constitution and by-laws of the church after six months on the field. In an effort to expand participation in church leadership, the new pastor encouraged the congregation to broaden its base by expanding the deacon board by six and creating the office of "Senior Deacons" for those men who had served for more than twenty years. The church embraced this change by electing seven deacons a year to three year terms. The deacons now totaled twenty-one. Their responsibility was:

To care for the poor, to help the sick especially the indigent sick, to assist the pastor in the government of the church, to make provisions for the Lord's Supper, to make suggestions for the revision of the church roll, to consider all cases of discipline, to bring such cases before the church if expedient, to report at regular monthly meetings of the church any matter which attention should be given.³⁰⁷

Senior deacons had all the duties and responsibilities of a deacon, but were elected to serve for the rest of their lives unless charges of misconduct were proven against them. The first senior deacons were J.L. Baldwin, D.L. Dobson, L.F. Gore, John R. Hanby, J.A. Orrell, Dr. W.T. Smith, S.B. Tabb, and J.D. Vann.³⁰⁸

The two most important committees, according to Rev. Maddry—the Evangelistic Committee and Visiting and Enlistment committee—were enlarged to include twenty-two and eighteen members, respectively. A study of the church roll indicated there were one hundred twenty-five male members between the ages of twenty-five and thirty years old, but no Sunday School class for them. Wallace West agreed to begin a class specifically for these men who had joined First Baptist during the war years, or were returning home to the church after serving in World War II. This class, formed after the example of a class started by Dr. W.T. Smith many years earlier, would become one of the largest and most productive classes in the church. The Smith and West classes merged in 2001. The Smith class had been in existence for more than one hundred years by then and the West class had been a part of First Baptist for fifty-five years.

Organizational adjustments suggested by Rev. Maddry were in place by the close of 1946. The annual report indicates it had been another strong year for First Baptist Church. The congregation had grown to over fifteen

hundred members with the one hundred ten people who joined over the last twelve months. The treasurer reported almost sixty thousand dollars had been given in offerings—twelve thousand of it went to the building fund which had grown to thirty-six thousand dollars. Another sixteen thousand dollars were contributed to mission causes supported by the church. The enrollment for Sunday School stood at eight hundred sixty, and the average attendance was now four hundred thirty-five.³⁰⁹ Momentum was mounting with the mission effort started in Lake Forest and with the support of the Baptist State Convention. Plans were made to begin working toward starting a new church in the neighborhood that was now erupting with young couples and their children. With the guidance and dedication of Edwin B. Josey, Jack Baldwin, and Otto K. Pridgen the dream became a reality when Lake Forest Baptist Church was established in 1950. Rev. Maddry was off to a great start in a church that showed potential for becoming one of the largest in North Carolina.

A change in the church staff occurred in 1947, with the resignations of John Chambers as Minister of Education, and Lucille Butler as Church Secretary. These positions were filled with Miss Margaret Parks as educational director and Mary Frances Combs became financial secretary and secretary to the pastor. A decision to remember and celebrate the past by establishing a "Temple of Archives" that was started by Mrs. Mollie Smith and Miss Helen Dobson came at the same time the church was planning for its bright future.³¹⁰ Thinking there was a growing need for ministry by members of the diaconate, Rev. Maddry suggested that the church increase the number of deacons for the second time in as many years. The number of men serving as deacons was expanded from twenty-one to twenty-six.

The trustees of Wake Forest College decided to relocate North Carolina's first Baptist institute of higher learning from the town from which it got its name to Winston-Salem. First Baptist was in a financial condition to have a part in assisting with defraying the expense involved in making the move westward. A pledge of five thousand dollars per year for the next five years was committed and fulfilled. The umbilical cord between Wake Forest University and First Baptist Church has connected these two institutions from their fledgling years in the early nineteenth century.

As the year came to a close the congregation expressed its support, confidence and appreciation for Rev. Maddry in the following statement that was written by Dr. J. H. Foster, Pastor Emeritus, and printed in the *Kingdom News*.

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One year ago today we welcomed you as our pastor. We knew the difficulties that lay before you. The war was over. Many who had united with us during this period we knew would be leaving. Others, who had not moved their membership with us, were regular in attendance and liberal in their giving. Many were leaving town. In all seventy-three letters of dismissal were granted during this year. If we had broken even it would not have been a bad showing. From September 1, 1947 there were one hundred and eighteen additions by letter and forty-six by baptism, giving a net increase for the year of ninety-one. From October 1, 1946 to August 1, 1947 our collections amounted to \$50,280.40. The large congregations gathering week after week bespeak a high appreciation on the part of the church going public. We are expecting greater progress for the year just beginning and by the grace of God we will help to this end.³¹¹

Six weeks later Dr. Foster passed away after a brief illness. He was eighty-six years old. In 1950, a silver communion service was presented to the church in memory of Dr. and Mrs. Foster by Mr. and Mrs. Howard Hanby. This is the communion service that continues to be used in worship services at First Baptist Church to this day.

The year 1948, brought plans for renovating the existing educational annex in order to add Sunday School classrooms, a chapel, library, and to renovate the kitchen. The building fund had grown to almost sixty thousand dollars but the cost for renovations was over eighty-five thousand. Rev. Maddry initiated periodic "Family Fellowship dinners." The annual business meeting of the church, held each October, now included a turkey dinner prepared by members of the Woman's Missionary Union. In March, Rev. M.E. Slinger was called from Waughtown Baptist Church in Winston-Salem to serve as assistant pastor for the growing congregation.

Just when it seemed the pastor and congregation was making substantial progress, Rev. Maddry, in September of 1950, received a call from Temple Baptist Church in his childhood home of Durham, North Carolina.³¹² Some members of First Baptist felt the decision to move was made easier because of conflict between the pastor and organist. Rumors were rampant that Rev. Maddry's frustration with the colorful Mr. Emurian had escalated to the point that the pastor could no longer work with the organist.

One month later, Margaret Parks resigned as religious education direc-

tor in order to accept the same position at Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. First Baptist Church went almost a year before calling its next pastor. Dr. O. L. Powers, a native of Wallace, North Carolina, filled the pulpit during the interim. "His views based on his vast experience, his keen wit, and his homely philosophy made the congregation appreciate him all the more."³¹³

By 1951, Wilmington was settling down as World War II was slipping into the chronicles of American history and becoming a memory for most Wilmingtonians. The activities at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company, Camp Davis, Fort Fisher, and Bluementhal Air Field had subsided. The city's population had returned to normal settling at forty-five thousand. What was a sleepy town before the war was now a city filled with stories of how it made a difference in saving the world from destruction. In March of that year, First Baptist Church called Rev. Randolph Gregory to be their next pastor. Little did the congregation know that this former military chaplain would lead their church for the next quarter of a century.

Rev. Gregory grew up in Norfolk, Virginia and earned a degree in Civil Engineering from Virginia Military Institute before studying at the University of Pennsylvania and graduating from Crozer Theological Seminary, in 1935. Temple Baptist Church in Washington D.C. ordained Randolph as he assumed his first pastorate in our nation's capital from 1935 until 1941. Rev. Gregory served as a chaplain in the United States Air Force during World War II and rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel while earning the Bronze Star and six Battle Stars. He returned to the pastorate after the war and led Franklin Baptist Church of Franklin, Virginia for five years before moving to Wilmington.³¹⁴

The parsonage at 117 South Fourth Street remained empty for almost one year while First Baptist was without a pastor. During that time the church determined it would be more feasible to sell the house and purchase a more suitable home. In February, 1951, the house on Fourth Street was sold for thirteen thousand dollars and "the Sullivan home" at 109 Forest Hills Drive was purchased for fourteen thousand five hundred dollars.³¹⁵ This house would serve as the new parsonage of First Baptist Church, and home to the Gregory's.

Rev. Randolph Gregory, along with his wife, Hilda, and their pre-school daughters arrived in Wilmington in May. Upon entering their new home they found the pantry filled with groceries as the Wilmington church expressed their warmth in receiving the new pastor and his family. This food would be well-earned in the years ahead as Rev. Gregory would strive to

live up to the reputation that preceded his arrival. Church minutes of April reveal the following remarks:

Mr. H.A. Hanby reported on the very favorable comments that had been received about our new pastor, Reverend Gregory. Dr. Clark who preached here during our revival services said that Reverend Gregory was the only minister he knew that "had everything." One of the deacons of the Baptist church in Franklin, Virginia, while on a business trip here, said that Reverend Gregory is the greatest preacher their church has ever had and that not only the church, but the whole town, is heart-broken at his leaving. Dr. Adams, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, told Mr. A.L. Batts that Reverend Gregory is one of the greatest men he has ever known.³¹⁶

A committed team of deacons greeted the new pastor upon his arrival. Men like Armon E. Baggett, Howard Hanby, J.G. Middleton, Hugh Noffsinger, M.L. Rooks, R.L. Williams, Amos Wofford, and Leonard F. Gore had been guiding the congregation for better than a year and expected Rev. Gregory to be an enthusiastic pastor with keen leadership skills. Certainly, this was needed because they had recently lost one of the most devoted laymen the church ever had. Dr. W.T. Smith died one month before Rev. Gregory arrived in Wilmington. He had served as a Sunday School teacher, member of the diaconate, pastor search committees, and as a trustee. He would be sorely missed by the church and the community. Dr. Tom Head, whose mother served as church organist from 1917 until 1942, said:

Dr. Smith may have been the most influential man in my life. He started an orchestra for kids and paid to have instructors teach us. If there were children who wanted to play but could not afford an instrument, Dr. Smith bought one for them. Perhaps the greatest motivating factor I ever had was the desire to play well enough that Dr. Smith would invite me to play in the orchestra. I practiced harder than I had ever done anything in my life because I knew I would get the chance to one day play in church as a member of Dr. Smith's Bible Class Orchestra.³¹⁷

On May 7, the church passed a resolution of respect in memory of Dr. W.T. Smith (Appendix Fifteen).

In September, Rev. Gregory took the deacons to the North Carolina Baptist Assembly at Fort Caswell for a weekend retreat to become better acquainted and share his expectations of them. This became an annual activity of the deacons that has continued into the twenty-first century. Upon their return the deacons requested, and received approval of the congregation, to enlarge their board to twenty-eight members that would be elected in teams of seven. Each team was elected to four year terms, rather than what had been twenty-six members serving three year terms. These deacons were challenged to:

1. Win at least one hundred fifty new members to the church.
2. Have at least fifty percent of the deacons present at the Wednesday evening prayer services.
3. Be an active support of the monthly layman's breakfast.
4. Visit regularly the Sunday evening Baptist Training Union.³¹⁸

They believed, "If we have the true spirit of Christ and enthusiasm born of spiritual fellowship one with another, we will be able to more than achieve our plans."³¹⁹

November brought a recommendation from the deacons that the church begin broadcasting the morning worship services twice per month on the city's only radio station, alternating with another Wilmington church. The recommendation was unanimously approved for a period of three years. There was also a motion requesting the hiring of a director of youth ministry as soon as possible. This motion was approved, as well. The year came to a close with anticipation that 1952 would be a great year. The new pastor was well-organized, gaining more respect and confidence of the congregation with each passing day. He also had an inspired team of deacons demonstrating their commitment to Christ and His church by the service they were rendering.

The year opened poorly with organist, choirmaster Henri Emurian announcing his resignation in order to accept a similar position at Park Place Methodist Church in Norfolk, Virginia.³²⁰ For the past nine years, he had directed the music ministry in such a way that the worship services and special performances by the choir were unmatched across the city. His ability to compose music equaled his performance. Tom Head recalled "Henri's reputation for being a thorn in the side of the pastors he worked with was true. He seldom had money and had an affinity for staying out late and con-

suming alcohol.”³²¹ Sam Bissette remarked, “Henri was the most colorful staff member this church ever had. I remember the time he called me at two o’clock in the morning attempting to recruit me into the choir.”³²² His resignation was difficult for the church as well as the city of Wilmington. He was called on to play for all sorts of events across the city. Ann Brown remembered living across the street from the church and being awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of Henri Emurian playing the organ.

Miss Helen Dobson directed the music and served as organist during the five month interim before Norman K. Allen became Minister of Music in July. Several young men were emerging as new lay leaders who were being mentored by veterans who had seen First Baptist through the difficult days of the depression and World War II. Rod Croom, Leon Brogden, Wallace West, C.G. Berry, Waddell Corbett, Ted Davis, Claud Efird, Ransom Holliday, Chester Jones, Jack Davis, James Swails, Yates Warwick, and W.B. Lennon were now serving in leadership roles among the men. Miss Nellie Pickard was stepping away from leading the ministry to children and Emma Childs and Ruth Nance were stepping forward. Carl Warwick recalled Miss Nellie always being around the church. “It seems like my mama and daddy were at church every time the doors were open, when I was a child. And, if they weren’t at church, part of the church was at my house. But, I never went to church when Miss Nellie wasn’t there.”³²³ Barbara Guy said, “The highlight of the year for us was Children’s Day. Miss Nellie put forth more time and energy to make us look the best we could when the children lead the service on Children’s Day.”³²⁴ Ruth Clayton remembered, “Miss Nellie decorated the front of the church with huge flowers, trees, even caged birds on Children’s Day.”³²⁵ The children who sat under the care and teaching of Miss Nellie Pickard continue to sing the songs they learned from her. She touched their lives in an unforgettable way.

Mollie Smith and Mrs. John Stevens continued as steady guides for the Woman’s Missionary Union which was now involving more than two hundred ladies. Ladies participated in local mission projects every week and provided educational activities concerning missions for men, women and children. The ladies also continued to update and beautify the parlor where they met for Sunday School, missions meetings and social functions. The monthly meetings of the diaconate were also held in this room.

By the end of 1953, First Baptist Church was operating like a well-oiled machine. Rev. Paul Beam had been called to serve as Minister of Education. As an organizer of adults and willing worker with teenagers, the groundwork was being laid for a bright future for First Baptist leaders. A

kindergarten was begun to meet the needs of Wilmington residents who worked downtown and desired to have their children cared for by Christian adults in a church setting. Emma Williams and Mrs. Thomas Lawther did a remarkable job beginning and directing this ministry for many years. Sunday School attendance was growing faster than space could be provided. Fortunately, the church was able to negotiate a rental agreement with the City of Wilmington that allowed First Baptist to use the vacant Wilmington Light Infantry Armory located next door to alleviate the good problem they were experiencing.

Rev. Gregory's eloquence in the pulpit caused the sanctuary to be filled to capacity on a regular basis. He was now wearing a ministerial robe each time he entered the pulpit which fit the traditional order of worship that was customary of First Baptist Church. His reputation for being a profound speaker was beginning to spread across the state such that invitations to lead revivals were being received from other churches and speaking requests were coming from Campbell, Meredith, Mars Hill and Wake Forest Colleges. The finances of the church were stronger than ever. Deacon Dan Penton, Jr., remarked that 1953, "was one of the greatest years our church has ever experienced, both spiritually and financially; commended Mr. Gregory, for the excellent job he was doing; and requested all the deacons to give him their full support."³²⁶

Rev. Gregory continued reminding the laity that they must ask themselves daily: "1) Is our church better spiritually because of me? 2) Is my community better because of me? 3) Is my home better because I have been true to Jesus Christ? 4) Have I lived in such a manner that my neighbors have called me "Christian?"³²⁷ He also led the deacons to initiate a "Junior Deacon Board" for men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. These young men would serve along with the deacons playing the role of mentor. The one-year trial period for this new ministry was begun in 1955.³²⁸ Leon Todd, John Clayton, Sam Bissette, Dr. Bertram Williams, Norvelle Longhorne, Kenneth Biggs, Herbert Fisher, O.K. Pridgen, Jr., Jere Freeman, and Julian Tusch were a few of the fourteen men chosen for the first group. This special designated position of the diaconate for young men was similar to the "Deacon Emeritus" distinction for older men, put in place in May of 1951.³²⁹ This position of honor was bestowed on deacons who had admirably served the congregation for many years and were at a point whereby they felt it better to retire from serving. W.A. Whitney and D.C. Marshall were two of the first people elevated to this honorable position. "Deacon Emeritus" members have continued to be installed and honored

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to this day. The "Junior Deacon" ministry was dissolved in 1961, when the church began electing deacons who were under the age of thirty-five.

Growth continued in all areas of the church during the next few years. A staff change occurred in March, 1954, when Norman Allen resigned as Minister of Music and was replaced by Douglas Rafter. Space continued to be an issue as church membership and attendance continued to climb. To alleviate part of the problem, the family of Waddell Corbett purchased for the church a small two-apartment house then adjacent on Fifth Street. This building became the temporary classroom home for teenagers and young adults. A renovation of the existing educational annex and the sanctuary took place in 1956.

Without and within, the original sanctuary underwent repair and treatment. Slate that originally covered the spires was replaced by copper. Two windows which in the original had been outside windows fronting the north on either side of the pulpit were replaced by a solid wall. All the woodwork was sanded to its original state, and a natural stain placed on it. The re-decorated sanctuary—with its renovated entry and vestibule, its improved organ and choir space, and its new lighting system—was truly a work of restoration. Mr. Gregory preached and Douglas L. Rafter directed the choir as they worshipped down at the old Manor Theater while the work was in progress.³³⁰

The renovation of the sanctuary included the addition of the first air conditioning system.

The unified budget for 1956 exceeded one hundred thousand dollars for the first time in the history of the church. Twenty-two percent of the budget was designated for missions, but First Baptist was about to expand their local appeal through a new mission venture. Back in the newly renovated sanctuary, the church decided to take their morning worship services into the homes of Wilmingtonians by going on television. After several years of broadcasting the services on the airwaves, the deacons felt it was time to expand this home mission project.

A Maundy Thursday candlelight communion service and Good Friday Tenebrae service was held during Holy Week, 1956, at the urging of the pastor. These special services were well-attended, provoked a new spirituality within the congregation, and have continued to this day. Even with the announcement of the resignation of Douglas Rafter as Minister of Music,

the Easter services carried a new enthusiasm like First Baptist had not previously enjoyed. Mr. Rafter was succeeded by R. Elliott Brock who began on January 1, 1957. Miss Helen Dobson again filled the vacancy by serving as organist and choir director during the seven month interim.

In July of that same year, Rev. Paul Beam resigned from his post in order that he may begin serving as Minister of Education at River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia.³³¹ While the church regretted to hear of Rev. Beam's decision to leave, and there was a certain disappointment in losing such a capable leader who had moved the Sunday School, Church Training, and Youth ministries to new heights, the congregation stayed the course of continuing to look for new ways to expand their ministry. The opportunity came in the fall of the year when a team began to investigate the possibility of beginning a new mission on the north side of Wilmington in a community called Murrayville. Claud Efird led the exploration effort for better than a year before Eugene Bullard brought the motion that First Baptist provides support for beginning a new church at Murrayville.³³² After unanimously approving the motion, the commitment was made to provide a portion of the pastor's salary and housing allowance for the first five years, and underwrite the cost of constructing the first unit of the building at an amount not to exceed fifteen thousand dollars. By October, 1958, the Murrayville Mission had become an additional outpost in the ministry of First Baptist Church.

In addition to this local mission project, the church determined to become more active in the support of international missions by adopting a foreign missionary. The person they chose to support with the Lottie Moon Christmas offering was Miss Mary Hester Powell. Miss Powell served in Nigeria through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. Her connection to First Baptist was that she was the niece of Louise Turner, a member of the church. Financial and prayer support, along with letters from members of the congregation, were provided to Miss Powell. She visited Wilmington often and provided reports of her mission field activities when home on furlough.

The first deacon's meeting of 1957 found Rev. Gregory challenging this team of lay leaders like never before. In anticipation of the celebration of the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the church, Rev. Gregory asked the deacons to lead the entire congregation in an eighteen month period of intensive evangelism across Wilmington. He also pointed out the need for additional parking spaces and room for Sunday School expansion. It was the pastor's opinion that,

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This church can remain at its present location for the next one hundred years and continue to grow as the community grows if the following conditions are met:

- (a) Sufficient space for Sunday School is obtained;
- (b) Sufficient parking space provided;
- (c) Equipment is kept up to date;
- (d) Church program is kept up to date.³³³

At the time of this writing, there has been no increase in the number of parking spaces in the small lot behind the church, but the acquisition of the former home of Dr. J. Buren Sidbury and the purchase of the former Wilmington Light Infantry Armory has allowed for additional Sunday School classrooms. The parking issue continues to haunt the church almost fifty years later even with the additional seventy-eight spaces in the parking garage that came with the church purchasing the former New Hanover County Law Enforcement Center (now called the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center) in 2003.

The Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, was made special in 1957, when Rev. Gregory introduced a new element into the worship service. On May 26, an insertion in the worship service included a time to remember those members of the church who had died in the last twelve months. Their names were called and family members stood as the deceased and their living relatives were remembered in a special prayer. That began a tradition that has remained to this day. Each Memorial Day Sunday, the names of those who have died in the last year are called and a member of their family brings forth a long-stemmed red rose in their memory. The roses are then placed in a vase to serve as the centerpiece on the communion table for that day. Tears of joy, sorrow, and love are always shed in this special service of celebration and remembrance.

By summer, Rev. Gregory was concerned that the growth of the church was causing the congregation to become impersonal for some. He recommended that the annual church picnic be replaced by a church wide fish fry and encouraged the deacons to be intentional about introducing themselves to people they did not know. This gathering exceeded everyone's expectation when approximately six hundred fifty people attended.³³⁴ The plan to bring the church together to meet one another became a celebration of who First Baptist was and all that they were accomplishing in the community. The only negative thing that resulted from the activity surfaced when one deacon later reported he had heard that some of the young people were dancing at the fish fry and had planned to have a church-sponsored

dance for the next social. His suspicions were never realized and it was thought this was a rumor that originated from a "Fun Frolics" event that included "folk games to the tune of music," planned by the teenagers.

Carl Warwick fondly remembered having dances at the church when he was a teenager, though the word in most ecclesiastical circles was that Baptists did not dance.

Charlie English remembered that fish fry and the subsequent church wide gatherings that have followed. However, he regrets that the annual picnic was replaced.

The annual picnic was always held at Wrightsville Beach and if you were a regular attendee in Sunday School you got to go. Times were different than they are now. The church was the center of everything. The only social life anyone had was at the Y.M.C.A. or the church. It seemed every member of the church was the same back then—poor, and though it was only a few miles away, we only went to the beach once a year—the day of the Sunday School picnic. We would all gather downtown and ride the trolley to the Lumina. There were usually about a hundred of us. The church took large drums of lemonade and sandwiches. We would stay all day long and return home terribly sunburned. But, the memories of the day were so good you never wanted to miss a day of Sunday School.³³⁵

Food was a part of most First Baptist gatherings in the sixties and seventies, and two ladies who did a lot of it were Olivia Warwick and Hazel Efird. These two ladies were great cooks whose reputations spread throughout the church family when they began serving meals for the annual deacon dinner. Soon, the business conferences included a prepared meal by members of the expanding "Kitchen Committee." Sometimes there were as many as three hundred people at the annual business conference and Rev. Gregory wanted everyone fed. Sally Brogden recalled, "An impatient Mr. Gregory would wander through the kitchen asking when everything was going to be done so we can eat. The whole time he was stealing a taste of whatever he could find."³³⁶ It is anyone's guess how many meals Olivia Warwick and Hazel Efird prepared for church gatherings. These two ladies were still baking treats for members of the church well into the 1990s. They were also sharing family recipes and teaching young brides how to prepare special meals.

1958 was a year of celebration and remarkable advancement for First

Baptist Church. The year began with Dr. Bertram Williams recommending that the church purchase the Beery property between Fourth and Fifth streets on the south side of Market Street. Upon completion of the purchase, the house was used as Sunday School space for teenagers. It would eventually become known as the YAC (Youth Activities Center). There could have been no better name for this historic house that was transformed into one of the busiest buildings in Wilmington. It was the first step toward the dream of having an on-going activity center like the one on Independence Boulevard that the church now owns and operates.

A spiritual apex came in the spring of the year when Dr. Baker James Cauthen, executive secretary of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, came to First Baptist to lead a revival. The worship services were bathed in prayer. Home prayer meetings were hosted by one hundred church members for several weeks preceding the revival. Rev. Gregory designated May 4, as "High Attendance Day" for the Sunday School and set a goal of having eight hundred in attendance. There is no evidence that the goal was achieved. Mrs. Hilda Gregory recalled an attendance of seven hundred forty on that day and that thirty-nine new members were received into the church.³³⁷ The result of the revival was a spirit of re-dedication that permeated the membership of the church. This series of meetings was followed by special activities and services celebrating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the church. Mrs. Sidney Jones wrote and directed a pageant involving a cast of at least one hundred people, re-enacting highlights of First Baptist's history. A historical marker in front of the church was unveiled and dedicated as a part of the celebration. That marker stood along Market Street, until falling victim to the winds of hurricane Fran in 1996.

The addition of Rev. Jack Hasty as Minister of Education proved to be a good move for the congregation. His keen organizational skills were vital to assimilating new and inactive members who were returning to the church. The membership stood at better than sixteen hundred by year's end, and more than one thousand members were enrolled in Sunday School. Five hundred seventy-five people attended Sunday School on a weekly basis. Anticipating future growth, a committee was appointed to begin studying the feasibility of purchasing any nearby property that became available as well as the possibility of erecting an addition to the educational building. Additionally, Dr. Robert Fales, John Stevens, Sally Brogden, Waddell Corbett and Bruce Cameron were appointed "to investigate the possibility of securing ten or more acres of land in future planned

residential areas in New Hanover County, which would be an area that would not be served by an existing Baptist Church.”³³⁸

Christmas brought another worship service that has become a tradition of the church. For many years the church met for worship on Christmas morning with a breakfast preceding the service. They did the same thing on Thanksgiving morning. In 1958, the pastor recommended that the Christmas day service be replaced by a Christmas Eve candlelight communion service. It was well-received the first year and has grown to the point that since 2004, there are three candlelight communion services held on Christmas Eve.

In 1959, the Atlantic Coastline Railroad announced plans to transfer its Wilmington offices to Jacksonville, Florida. The expansive railroad company was one of the largest employers in the Cape Fear region and many of those in upper management relocated. Hourly employees were forced to seek jobs elsewhere. The effect on the membership of First Baptist Church resulted in the transfer of seventy-eight families.³³⁹ One hundred fifty-six members moved out of Wilmington in 1961. The sanctuary was filled for most morning worship services prior to the relocation of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad offices. The average attendance in Sunday School peaked at five hundred ninety-three in 1960. There was an immediate decrease of twenty percent the following year. The move had a dramatic effect on Wilmington and the First Baptist Church. Community and ecclesiastical leaders moved southward and so did the attendance at gatherings of First Baptist Church.

By the end of 1961, the educational building was in need of major repair. Parts of the building had nothing appreciable done to them since the erection of the complex in the early 1920s. An appointed committee examined the condition of every room in the building and concluded repairs and renovations were needed in every room except the sanctuary, chapel and parlor. Forty thousand dollars was pledged to make the physical adjustments. The money was to be paid over the following two years, and it was. While giving continued to be a strong point for the church, membership was continuing to decrease. The resident membership had fallen to eleven hundred by the end of the year. The average attendance in Sunday School had decreased to four hundred sixty. The good news for the year came in the form of the gift of a house at Wrightsville Beach from Mr. and Mrs. J.E. McWatty. The house at # 6 Bermuda Drive became a center of summertime activity for Sunday School classes, members of the youth group, ladies in the WMU held luncheon meetings and men of the church

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gathered there for oyster roasts and shrimperooos. A note in the church minutes indicates the McWatty beach house was used on fifty-eight occasions in 1962 and additional activities were planned for '63.³⁴⁰

In August of 1962, the church called Walter Ross to be its new Minister of Music.³⁴¹ His salary was five thousand dollars, but as organist he was allowed to use the organ to teach private lessons in order to supplement his salary. Mr. Ross served the church until July of 1965. Miss Helen Dobson directed the music for several months following the departure of Mr. Ross and the arrival of Warren Coker in 1966.

The team that was assigned the task of finding vacant property around Wilmington that could be purchased for the future expansion of the church got the break they were looking for in January of 1963. In a lunch meeting at the Cape Fear Club with Hugh McRae, the four-man team negotiated the purchase of eight acres between Oleander Drive and Shipyard Boulevard for forty thousand dollars. These were two of Wilmington's primary thoroughfares at the time. A new school was being built on adjacent property and there were plans to widen Independence Boulevard that would connect Oleander and Shipyard. Developers also planned for neighborhoods to be built around the property.

When the men reported their finding to the church, the congregation had many questions. After months of discussing the matter, Bruce Cameron assured the congregation that they should buy the property, if only to hold it for a few years and then resell if they determined the land could not benefit the church's plan for outreach. On February 28, 1964, the church voted to purchase eight acres bordered by Canterbury Road, Fordham Road and Independence Boulevard by borrowing forty thousand dollars.³⁴² This decision provided more avenues for growth, and created more tension within the congregation than anyone could imagine. Sam Bissette remembered:

Some members were hesitant to vote for the purchase because they were fearful there was a move afoot to relocate the church. Downtown Wilmington was suffering through "White Flight." Surrounding neighborhoods were changing from well-kept historic homes with manicured lawns to boarding houses and low-rent apartments for people who didn't match the profile of potential church members. Some members voted to purchase the property in the suburbs as a means of security for the future of the church. Some people affirmed the work of the com-

mittee and voted in favor of making the purchase because they saw the potential for birthing yet another church like the others First Baptist started in the last fifty years.³⁴³

Each faction had its own reason for agreeing to the purchase and First Baptist Church is still reaping the benefits of the decision that was made on a cold February night in 1963.

Two months later, another opportunity for expanding their property came before the church when Dr. Buren Sidbury informed Rev. Gregory that he wanted to talk about selling his house to First Baptist. Rev. Gregory began planting a seed with the aged physician a year earlier. Now in declining health, Dr. Sidbury inquired of the interest the church would have in purchasing his house. Dr. Sidbury asked that the church pay him ten thousand dollars per year for three years, and allow him to continue living in a small part of the three story structure for one year. Dr. Sidbury also agreed to return one thousand dollars a year to the church as a donation.

A team was appointed to study downtown real estate to determine if the church wanted to accept Dr. Sidbury's proposal. Their determination was that Dr. Sidbury was asking too much for the house because comparable structures were selling for half of what he was asking. As in most real estate transactions, the church's decision hinged on the fact that Dr. Sidbury's property adjoined the church property. On April 15, the church voted to purchase the property for thirty thousand dollars but there were many who wondered if it was a good decision. Where would the church get the additional money to buy the house when it had just borrowed forty thousand dollars for other property? The vote passed with sixty-nine members voting in the affirmative and fifty-one opposed.³⁴⁴

Arrangements were made to pay Dr. Sidbury one thousand dollars down and an additional ten thousand dollars on December 15 of 1964, '65, and '66. Sunday School classes began meeting in the house in May, 1964. The purchase agreement took a fortunate turn in favor of the church when Dr. Sidbury sent a letter to the deacons in June of 1965 requesting that all future payments be deferred as long as the church agreed to name the house after his deceased father.³⁴⁵ Dr. Bertram Williams said he remembered Dr. Sidbury remarking, "The annual payments are to be deferred until I inform you that I need the money, and he never asked the church to make another payment."³⁴⁶ The trustees accepted the request and generosity of the retired Pediatrician. Today a portrait of Dr. Sidbury adorns the wall just inside the front door of the house.

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In the eighteen years that this writer has been a member of the ministerial staff at the church I have never heard the house referred to as anything other than the "Sidbury House."

In December of 1965, the church was informed that their contract to televise Sunday morning worship services was coming to an end. In light of the ineffective outreach results of this ministry and a report that few of the homebound members were taking advantage of this ministry, the church decided to discontinue the broadcast.³⁴⁷

Average Sunday School attendance continued spiraling downward until it stabilized at three hundred seventy-five in 1966.³⁴⁸ The budget was met each year, but it remained stagnant, for First Baptist Church lost nearly three hundred members in eight years. Few changes occurred in the leadership positions of the diaconate or the committees of the church. Receiving new members was a rare occasion. Young couples were difficult to find around the church, and teenagers were almost non-existent. The report of the Youth committee that appeared in the annual Book of Reports for 1967 read:

Members of the Youth Committee for 1967 were as follows:

Miss Barbara Lineberger, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Beck, Mr. and Mrs. Mike Seale. During the course of the year, both couples, the Becks and the Seales, moved from Wilmington and Miss Lineberger's resignation as chairman was accepted. For these reasons the committee as such did not function during the year.³⁴⁹

The morale of the church had changed drastically. The effect on downtown Wilmington was just as great.

In the early 1960s, the *Committee of 100*, a civic committee of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, sought to attract businesses to the area; and by the middle of the decade several industries set up divisions of their companies here, among them General Electric, DuPont, Carolina Nitex, Herco-Fina, Babcock and Wilcox, and Corning. Having to turn to wider interests made Wilmington citizens work all the harder for their schools, community projects, and their churches.³⁵⁰

The annual business conference was held on January 25, 1967. The primary topic of conversation centered on where the new organ should be

placed in the sanctuary. The three expressed opinions were: 1) the balcony in the back of the sanctuary; 2) the same location as the previous organ which was in the gallery above the pulpit; and 3) the pulpit level in the front of the sanctuary. The recommendation of the organ builder, Schantz Organ Company of Orrville, Ohio, was that the new organ be installed in the rear balcony of the church. The recommendation of the committee (Waddell Corbett, Jere Freeman, Granville Ryals, Jack Sneed, Harold W. Wells, Jr., and Dr. Bertram Williams) was influenced by architect, Charles Boney, who suggested the rear of the balcony. However, consensus could not be found among the members of the congregation. After taking a secret ballot vote, the one hundred seventy-six members present voted to install the organ in the front of the sanctuary in the choir loft above the pulpit, by a vote of one hundred thirty-three to forty-three.

The new organ was installed in March of 1968, at a cost of seventy-five thousand dollars. The church had over half of the money in a fund that was started several years earlier. Because there was a need to make renovations to the educational building at the time the organ was to arrive, the trustees chose to borrow seventy thousand dollars from a local bank in order to pay for the organ and complete the building renovations. The debt was integrated into the annual budget and paid over the following three years. The Smith Bible class took on a personal project of refurbishing a basement room in the Sidbury House that they would use as their classroom. What had been a damp dungeon was transformed into useable space when the men installed a suspended ceiling, electric heat, new carpeting, and paneled the walls. This room has remained theirs since the renovation.

The organ was dedicated in a special worship service in May of 1968. It amazes this writer that the congregation made the decision to make such an expensive purchase during a time when the church, and much of Wilmington, was still reeling from the loss of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad. The four-manual organ has almost three thousand pipes that are divided into five divisions. Their size ranges from thirty-two feet to the size of a pencil. Those who have played the organ speak of the incredible instrument as though they are privileged to have the opportunity to play it.

One month after dedicating the new Schantz organ, the congregation decided to cancel Sunday evening worship services during the months of June, July, and August, in lieu of adding a service at 9:00 a.m. The reason given was that attendance at morning worship services increased and evening worship attendance decreased in the summer. Their hope was that

the additional service would entice more people to attend worship before engaging in other activities on Sunday afternoons during the summer. This change lasted for only one year.

A special gift was presented to the trustees of First Baptist Church when they were informed, in June, that Mrs. Howard (Ione Foster) Hanby had donated a house and lot at Sixteenth and Chestnut streets, with the understanding that it be sold and the proceeds used for a suitable memorial to her late husband.³⁵¹ The Hanbys did not have children of their own so Mr. Hanby adopted all the boys of First Baptist by teaching their Sunday School class. In remembering Mr. Hanby, Charles English said:

All the young boys looked forward to joining Mr. Hanby's Sunday School class. He loved us as though we were his own. Mr. Hanby owned a candy store downtown and always had a piece for the boys in his class. Once a year he invited all the boys down to the store and allowed us to fill a large bag with all the candy we could. I don't remember the Bible lessons he taught us but I remember him teaching me how to love everyone like he did.³⁵²

Dr. Bertram Williams said, "Mr. Hanby was the most influential man in my life when I was a young boy."³⁵³

Two months after receiving the gift from Mrs. Hanby, the church sold their Wrightsville Beach cottage at # 6 Bermuda Drive for twenty-seven thousand dollars. The proceeds from the sale of the property were placed in a new trust fund designated for future construction.³⁵⁴ Most houses at Wrightsville Beach are valued at better than one million dollars today.

In addition to selling property in 1968, First Baptist Church also gave away a piece of property. A service celebrating the growth of the Murrayville Baptist Mission was conducted on December 1. As a part of the service, James Swails, representing First Baptist Church, presented the deed for the land and buildings, and the right hand of fellowship to the pastor of the newly constituted Murrayville Baptist Church, another daughter church of First Baptist. This church has grown to the point that its attendance matches the average number of worshippers of First Baptist Church. The church calls itself Northside Baptist Church. It plans to expand its facilities on the one hundred acre tract of land they have purchased along North College Road.

In April of 1967, Warren Coker, the organist-choirmaster, resigned his position to enter the United States Army, and once again Miss Helen Dob-

son was leading the music program of the church and directing the twenty member Chancel Choir from the organ console.³⁵⁵ It was November of 1968 before she was relieved of duty. At that time, the church called Arnold Briggs as its new Minister of Music.

A capable organist, Mr. Briggs also directed the Chancel Choir and attempted to resurrect a music program that had suffered greatly during the recent lean years for the church. He found but a remnant for the youth and children's choirs upon his arrival. It took years of hard work to establish a graded program of music, and even then there was little to show in the youth and children's choirs. Possibly, one thing that hampered Mr. Briggs' effectiveness was that he never joined the church. His failing to make a commitment to the congregation was an indication that he understood his role to be that of an employee rather than a member of the church family. Arnold Briggs came to First Baptist after spending thirteen years directing the music of Washington Street United Methodist Church in Alexandria, Virginia. For the next seventeen years, he led the music ministry of First Baptist Church. He was a gifted organist that enhanced the worship services of First Baptist through his playing and the direction he provided for the Chancel Choir but there were few children or teenagers that participated in the music ministry of the church.

The year 1969 began with the news that a lighted stained-glass window would be installed in the front wall of the sanctuary directly above the choir loft. The window was presented as a gift from Mrs. Hanby in memory of her husband, Howard. The cost of the window and its installation was paid for from the proceeds of the sale of the Chestnut Street property Mrs. Hanby donated to the church. The sale of the property realized over seven thousand dollars. The beauty of the window depicting the last supper of Jesus with his disciples attracts the eyes of worshippers as soon as they enter the sanctuary. It is appropriate that an object that demands the attention of everyone entering First Baptist Church would be the gift memorializing someone who for years worked to bring glory to God, not attention to himself.

The church also received two generous donations of stock from Mr. and Mrs. Waddell Corbett early in the year. Like Howard and Ione Hanby, Waddell and Bitsy loved First Baptist Church and gave of themselves to support the mission and ministry whenever they perceived a need occurred that they could assist in meeting. Their quiet unassuming manor spoke volumes when it came to furthering the Kingdom of God.

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A "Church Planning Committee" was appointed in 1969, to determine the advantages and disadvantages of erecting a new educational building on the site of the existing one. If it was not feasible to build downtown, an option would be to build an entire new church plant on the eight acre site on Independence Boulevard. The sixteen members of the committee faced the greatest building challenge posed to the church since the decision to move from Front Street to Fifth and Market. Downtown Wilmington was being abandoned by most businesses and many homeowners. Bars and night clubs replaced retail shops while historic homes were being ignored and falling into disrepair. "White Flight" was becoming more pronounced as First Baptist transitioned from a neighborhood church to a church that met downtown on Sundays, but lived in the suburbs. Southside Baptist had already moved from downtown leaving First Baptist as the only Baptist church, and one of the few churches period, that remained downtown.

By the fall, the committee had weighed the positives and negatives to staying downtown. Both the Independence Boulevard property and the site at Fifth and Market streets were found to have challenges and opportunities. Meetings that lasted late into the night revealed strong opinions from both sides of the issue. Finally, the committee agreed that they would not bring a recommendation before the church, but that the congregation would have to discuss and decide the future location of First Baptist. O.K. Pridgen brought the motion at a September business conference that "the First Baptist Church be and remain in perpetuity at the present location at the corner of Fifth and Market streets."³⁵⁶ The meeting was adjourned without a vote on the motion after extensive discussion. Two weeks later, at another business conference, there was considerable discussion from no fewer than twenty-five members. The majority of questions asked were directed to Chester Jones, chairman of the church planning committee.

Jack Sneed brought a motion that the church maintain the downtown buildings and campus, but that a building be erected on the Independence Boulevard property that contained a chapel and space for an on-going Sunday School. Mr. Sneed's motion brought questions that were pertinent to his idea, but the original motion from Mr. Pridgen was the one that was to be voted on. Before the evening ended a vote was taken on the Pridgen motion and the decision of those present was that the church would remain downtown by a vote of one hundred fifty-four to sixty-eight.³⁵⁷

Chairman Jones then presented the following motion that passed easily.

I move that the Pastor, the Chairmen of the Board of Deacons, Board of Trustees and Finance Committee, get together as soon as possible and name two committees, to work together. One should be a Building Committee to start plans for a new Educational Building at our present location. The other a New Property Committee to ascertain as completely and quickly as possible, what nearby property can be acquired for parking purposes, and then report to the church for action.³⁵⁸

The appointed Building Committee had forty members and was co-chaired by Dr. Jimmy Smith and Tommy Johnson with Bud Davis serving as vice-chairman. Roy Armstrong was chosen to chair the seven-member New Property Committee. The following day an article appeared in the *Wilmington Star News* expressing relief and informing the community that the historic First Baptist Church had decided not to abandon downtown. Rev. Gregory wrote Appendix Sixteen in the *Kingdom News* following the meeting.

The close of the sixties found First Baptist venturing into a new area of outreach ministry. The church purchased a 1954, Ford bus for five hundred dollars. The bus would eventually be used by the pastor's wife to begin a bus ministry. Hilda Gregory directed the ministry and drove the temperamental bus to outlying areas and inner-city housing developments to provide a means of transportation to attend church functions for children who did not have such. First Baptist was reaching out in new directions to spread the good news of Christ and to grow its declining Sunday School. Why would a woman nearly fifty years old take such a risk? One of her contemporaries said:

Because Hilda Gregory was the hardest working woman I ever met. She did whatever it took to get people in church. Hilda used to sit in the balcony and look for visitors. When she saw someone she didn't recognize, she would hurry down the stairs and introduce herself as soon as the service ended. Then, she invited them to come to Sunday School the following week.³⁵⁹

Ann Brown recalled, "Mrs. Gregory broke Southern Baptist Sunday School rules by starting the first couples' class the church ever had. Men and women did not meet together for Bible study at First Baptist but Mrs. Gregory changed that to reach others."³⁶⁰

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However, by year's end, the average attendance in the Sunday School had dwindled to three hundred forty.

Downtown Wilmington was not a safe place in those days. Racial tension resulted in curfews. The historic Bellamy Mansion across the street from the church was set ablaze one evening. The Saint Thomas Catholic Church was burned. Robberies and assaults were common place.

In February 1971, Wilmington, North Carolina, trembled on the edge of race war. Buildings burned every night. White vigilantes roared through the city, spraying bullets at black citizens. Black snipers fired at police officers from rooftops downtown. Six hundred frightened National Guard troops patrolled the streets. Racial violence in the hallways of newly integrated public schools threatened to bring public education to a halt.³⁶¹

Frances Chappell remembered, "The church assigned deacons the task of walking the halls of the educational building during worship services to make sure the building remained secure."³⁶² Rev. J.C. Thomas recalled the attendance at Sunday evening worship services declining from one hundred thirty to less than twenty-five.³⁶³

The decade of the seventies began with an enlarged diaconate. One additional deacon was added to each four-year class bringing the total to thirty-two. Leaders of the laity at the start of the new decade included Kenan Maready, Tommy Johnson, Hilda Gregory, Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Doss, Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brogden, Mr. and Mrs. Ted Davis, Percy Hedquist, Mr. and Mrs. Claud Efird, Granville Ryals, Dr. Jimmy Smith, Roy Armstrong, Bud Davis, Mr. and Mrs. Yates Warwick, Waddell Corbett, Chester Jones, Helen Dobson, Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Nofsinger, Dr. Bertram Williams, Mollie Smith, Kenneth Biggs, Dr. Robert Fales, Herbert Fisher, Morris Powell, Mr. and Mrs. Charles English, Mr. and Mrs. John Clayton, Jack Sneed, Betty Stike, Sam Bisette, Mr. and Mrs. Pat Warren, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Williams, Mr. and Mrs. Gene Brown, and Mr. and Mrs. Wallace West to name a few.

Racial discord in Wilmington forced First Baptist to suspend their Sunday night and Wednesday evening activities. Louise Fisher and Sally English started a prayer meeting that met at noon each Wednesday. The program consisted of a light lunch being served, a hymn was sung, a devotional thought was shared by the pastor, and prayers were lifted up for God's people. Retired church members, those who did not work outside their homes and members who worked downtown gathered for the unique

service. It continues to this day though it is now held on Tuesdays and the location has changed to the Activities Center. The "Tuesday Lunch Bunch," directed by Frances Chappell has planned and prepared the meals for the last several years. In 2000, members of the ministerial staff considered dissolving the Tuesday lunch because it was thought that the kitchen crew, some in their eighties, was ready for a break. With deep sadness and great disappointment, every member of the team said, "Please don't take this ministry away from us. Preparing the lunches on Tuesdays gives us a way to continue serving the church family we love." The ladies continue to provide nutritious meals and lots of love for those who take part in the Tuesday noon prayer meetings.

The new property committee, intent on accomplishing their task, began exploring all rumors of downtown property that may be available for purchase. The building that housed the Carolina Apartments was available for two hundred fifty thousand dollars. The opinion of the committee was that the building would require extensive renovations and would not provide any additional parking, or the potential to add parking. They decided to pass on making an offer to purchase. The closest parcel was the Rainey Chevrolet property adjacent to the church that was vacated when Mr. Rainey chose to relocate his dealership. Members of First Baptist were permitted to use the lot for parking on Sunday mornings, but Mr. Rainey was not sure he wanted to sell his property. Rumor was that one-quarter of a million dollars would be required to get the attention of Mr. Rainey, and the church was not interested in purchasing anything downtown at that price. They did, however, recommend that a baseball field be built on the Independence Boulevard property in 1970. Their logic was that the field could be used for recreational purposes, and by using the property the church would no longer be liable to pay property taxes to the county. Their recommendation was unanimously approved and the field was built.

The Sunday School annex on the southeast corner of Fifth and Market streets was determined to be in poor condition and not worth repairing. With a need for additional downtown parking, and no longer an urgency to provide additional space for Sunday School classes, the church chose to demolish the small structure and use the property as a parking lot. The congregation received an offer to buy the YAC, at a cost of fifteen thousand dollars, but refused it and made a commitment to renovating the building and resurrecting the youth ministry. Mr. and Mrs. Bob Kennedy and Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hatch began the effort and the house was filled with teenagers in a matter of months.

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1972 was a year of special recognition for a couple of men who faithfully served First Baptist for a number of years. At a business conference in January, the church honored Jimmy Wade for his fifty-five years of work in the Sunday School ministry.³⁶⁴ By mid-year the church had secured the services of Dickie Miller to direct the resurging youth ministry. Mr. Miller's enthusiasm was contagious and his charisma created an immediate increase in the number of participating teenagers and the planned activities. In September the congregation expressed their heartfelt thanks and appreciation to Rev. J.C. Thomas upon his resignation as Minister of Education. Rev. Thomas served in this role for eight years, many of which were difficult because of the struggles faced by changes that occurred to the downtown congregation. Four months later, Rev. Charles Curtis Finch became the new Minister of Education. He came to Wilmington from Trinity Baptist Church in Raleigh where he held a similar position. Rev. Finch was married on January 27, 1973 and began his work at First Baptist on February 4.³⁶⁵

The year 1973, proved to be one of the most interesting years in the history of First Baptist Church. Decisions made in the first few months would serve as a life map for at least the next thirty-five years. The effect these decisions had on the future growth of the church could not have been imagined at the time.

At the quarterly business meeting, on January 31, Gilliam Horton reported on the recently created ball field that the Smith Bible class had added at the Independence Boulevard property. It was his sentiment that the eight acres were not being utilized to its fullest potential insofar as the needs of the church were concerned. He then proceeded to make a motion that a committee be appointed to make a study of the best possible use of the property with regard to the future of First Baptist Church, and that the committee report their findings at the April business meeting. The motion carried with an amendment by Jack Davis that priority be given to future youth activities because of the recent influx of teenagers into the church. The committee was appointed and named the "Church Goals and Objectives Committee." Members of the committee were James B. Wilson, Helen Dobson, Sylvia Fisher, Percy Hedquist, Dr. Alton Fales, Janet Kennedy, Garland Garret, Jr., Mrs. J.D. Freeman, Mrs. John Stevens, Dr. John Stike, and Jack Davis served as chairman.³⁶⁶ On April 4, 1973, the committee presented the report that appears as Appendix Seventeen.

After Jack Davis presented the report, Helen Dobson made a motion that the church reconsider the motion adopted by the church back in Oc-

tober of 1969 which read, "That the First Baptist Church be and remain at the present location at the corner of Fifth and Market streets." The motion was seconded by Garland Garrett, Jr. A lengthy discussion followed the report and subsequent motion which lead James Wilson, chairman of the deacons, to ask that the meeting be adjourned until April 25 in order for the entire congregation to have the opportunity to read and understand the report and motions that had been presented. Copies of the report were mailed to the entire congregation the following week.

Rev. Randolph Gregory opened the meeting in prayer asking for God's guidance, wisdom, and presence in the heart and mind of the church members when they met to consider the motion on April 25. Chairman Wilson asked those present to abide by the meeting order as contained in the church constitution which calls for one person speaking at a time; speakers should stand and address the moderator; speakers would be limited to speaking only once about a particular subject and only twice during the entirety of the conference. Church records reveal that one and one-half hours of discussion took place before any votes were taken. The vote to reconsider the motion that was approved in 1969, carried ninety-six to fifty. A standing vote was taken on the motion that the report of the Church Goals and Objectives committee be approved; the result being sixty-five for and sixty-four against accepting the report.³⁶⁷

With the closeness of the vote, and in the interest of harmony, the chairman called for a two-minute recess so that the committee on Church Goals and Objectives might reconvene and take a new look at their recommendation. The result was that the committee advised the membership that they would like to recommend a substitute motion to delete items B, C, and D from the recommendation. The vote on the substitute motion was carried by a vote of 147 to 3, which indicated a clear vote of confidence on the recommendation of the Church Goals and Objectives Committee.³⁶⁸

The historic meeting that could have resulted in a literal split "right down the middle" was adjourned with the singing of "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." The congregation recognized that choosing to relocate from downtown would do more to harm the already fractured church. Though wounded by the steady disintegration of downtown Wilmington, First Baptist Church decided to remain as light and prominence in the darkness that seemed to

persist. As in its prior one hundred sixty-five year history, the congregation would seek a way to expand its existing ministry by "doing a new thing" rather than abandoning the old. A new day was dawning for the dedicated Baptist remnant that had remained faithful to its heritage and committed to the hope of a better tomorrow. Preliminary plot plans and schematic sketches for a new building were generated within a couple of months and a sign advertising the forthcoming Activities Center was placed at the corner of Independence Boulevard and Canterbury Lane by July. Beside the sign was a billboard inviting passers by to join First Baptist Church when it met for worship at the corner of Fifth and Market streets as it continues to do today.

In October of 1973, Morris Powell, Jr. followed Dickie Miller as director of the youth ministry and the church decided to make a lifetime promise to Rev. and Mrs. Gregory. After faithfully serving as pastor for twenty-three years, and thinking he and First Baptist Church would continue serving God together in Wilmington for the rest of his ministry, Rev. Gregory made a request of the trustees, deacons, and members of the finance committee that upon his retirement in December of 1975, he be permitted to remain in the parsonage the remainder of his life, and the life of Mrs. Gregory if she survived him. He agreed to maintain the premises and all taxes that may come as a result of his change in status upon his retirement. The request was well-received and unanimously approved when presented to the congregation. There was an understanding that ownership of the property would remain with First Baptist Church and upon the death of Rev. and Mrs. Gregory, or their move from the home, the right to possession would be exercised by the church.³⁶⁹

While America's economy was stuck in the mire of a recession, First Baptist Church continued meeting its annual budgets and began to generate additional funding for the construction of the activities center. A committee of seven men was appointed to oversee the building and arrange for funding. James B. Wilson, Jr., Gilliam Horton, Waddell Corbett, Garland Garrett, Sr., Jack Davis, Jack Sneed, and Roy Armstrong would chart the course by making lead gifts and securing pledges for the rest. The *Future Building Fund* had a balance of nearly thirty thousand dollars, when the decision to build was made. An additional twenty thousand dollars was added to the fund with the approval of the budget for 1973. On June 30, 1974, the church property at 614 Market Street was sold to an attorney for fourteen thousand dollars and it too was placed in the "Future Building Fund."³⁷⁰ A contract was signed on August 14, authorizing John Oxenfeld, Architects to design the new eighteen thousand square foot building that would contain a gymna-

sium, kitchen, office space, locker rooms, and meeting rooms.³⁷¹ The estimated cost to build the activities center was three hundred fifty thousand dollars.

Morris Powell, Jr. resigned as Director of Youth Ministries during the summer of 1974, and Dale Adkins joined the staff on August 26, as Director of Youth and Recreation. He acquired a youth ministry that was gaining momentum each year. Mrs. Janet Kennedy was now directing a musical group of teenagers who called themselves "The Messengers." In addition to singing in worship services occasionally, The Messengers presented concerts in area churches and traveled to nearby cities presenting the message of Christ in music.

In November, a group of senior adults established a new ministry for people in their age group and named it the "Sunshine Club." With twenty-seven charter members, this group laid the foundation for what continues to be a close-knit group of mature adults who minister to each other through social activities, minister to the homebound through visitation, and reach out to the surrounding community by providing meals for the hungry and homeless.

First Baptist Church was once again emerging as an enthusiastic center of activity long before the activity center was finished. Even the retiring Randolph Gregory was considering ways to become more innovative in hopes of reaching unchurched people. In the July business conference he challenged attendees to consider a new worship service in which he and the deacons would become intentional about shaking hands and greeting guests before worship services, try "new, evangelistic music" rather than hymns, and rather than preaching from the pulpit in a robe the pastor would preach from in front of the communion table in a suit.³⁷² Church records do not indicate the reaction of the congregation to Rev. Gregory's idea but there is no mention of an additional worship service in the minutes of the church business conferences.

First Baptist was spending a lot of time, money, and energy on itself in 1974, but the outreach arm that had been a part of its ministry from the genesis of the church was also active. The congregation gave more money to mission causes than ever before in 1973 and 1974. Part of their gifts to local missions came on February 10, 1974, when they opened the doors of their church, hearts and wallets to the neighboring First Baptist Church at 520 North Fifth Avenue. The African-American congregation that traces its beginning to this First Baptist Church was grieving the loss of their building as a result of a fire. The two churches met under the same roof to worship God together on that day, and the entire offering was committed to rebuild-

ing the sanctuary five blocks up the street.³⁷³ The congregation that worshiped weekly at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street also extended an invitation for the African-American congregation to continue worshipping with them until their new house of worship was completed.

Rev. Randolph Gregory announced his resignation/retirement as pastor of First Baptist Church on January 5, 1975. In a letter to the congregation (Appendix Eighteen), the man who has held the longest pastoral tenure in the history of the church wrote from his heart.

As promised, Rev. Gregory continued filling the pulpit and carrying out his pastoral duties through July. As had been his custom from his first year with the Wilmington church, Rev. Gregory vacationed the entire month of August. Sunday, July 27 was designated as Appreciation Day for Randolph and Hilda. The church was filled to capacity with members, former members, and friends from the community who came to express their heartfelt love and appreciation to the Gregory family for all they had meant to First Baptist Church, and the city of Wilmington. Cards, letters, photographs, and clippings were presented to the first couple on their last Sunday as the pastoral team that had loved, supported, guided, challenged, ministered to, and received ministry from First Baptist Church. A monetary love gift of better than twenty-five thousand dollars was collected and presented to the retiring pastor and his wife. Rev. and Mrs. Gregory made the decision to purchase their own home and move from the manse for their retirement years, though the church had promised the couple several months earlier, they could remain in the parsonage until their death.

In his retirement years, Rev. Gregory served as interim pastor in a number of Baptist churches in the Cape Fear region, including First Baptist. He remained active in the affairs of the Pastor's Conference of the Wilmington Baptist Association. He was often called on by members of First Baptist Church to officiate at weddings and funerals of people who joined the church while he was the pastor. The church honored Rev. Gregory by naming him Pastor Emeritus in 1979. An avid outdoorsman, Randolph spent as much time as possible hunting, fishing, playing tennis, and tending his garden.

Rev. Randolph Gregory's pastorate at First Baptist Church was certainly filled with highs and lows. The celebrations and advancements of his first nine years were matched with the disappointment of watching downtown Wilmington collapse amid the economic and racial tension that escalated in the turbulent 1960s. The traumatic events in the life of our nation filtered down to affect everyone, even Wilmington, North Carolina. Social unrest created by the racial tension, the Vietnam War and protests against it, changing

sexual mores, Watergate and increasing political cynicism bred by its revelation, created major problems with issues of trust. Two presidential candidates were gunned down during this time—one slain and the other paralyzed for life. The nation's pre-eminent civil rights leader was assassinated; and the President of the United States resigned in disgrace. City curfews were enacted in Wilmington when downtown buildings were set ablaze. It was difficult for any pastor to lead his flock, yet Rev. Gregory steered First Baptist aggressively, with a flexible course and a steady hand. The challenge to find additional space that accompanied the growth of the church in the 1950s was replaced by frustrations generated by the energy exerted in an attempt to keep the congregation focused on a sense of accomplishment amidst the days of a dwindling membership.

Had it not been for his faith in God, support of his family, self-confidence and assurances from the leaders of the church, Rev. Gregory would have left years earlier. If not for their appreciation for, and devotion to the remembrance of those who came before them, First Baptist Church may have become another one of the historic, downtown churches that flourished in the fifties and all but closed their doors by the end of the century. Stories of ecclesiastical survival and hope in the midst of the Civil War, when yellow fever stole away the pastor and members of the congregation, served as inspiration for the dwindling congregation. For better than one hundred fifty years, First Baptist had been a voice of hope in downtown Wilmington; that voice would not leave nor be silenced in the midst of the social turmoil surrounding it. Even when the congregation voted to leave the mission field it had toiled in since its beginning, she paused and reconsidered her decision to abandon the downtown center of hope.

Randolph Gregory and the church did not give up, or give in to the pressures and temptations they faced; nor did they allow their hope and confidence in Jesus Christ to get distracted by changes and challenges that cried out for their attention. The pastor and congregation stayed the course, ran the race that was appointed for them and continued trusting in God's assurance that, "since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe."³⁷⁴ On February 25, 2002, Rev. Randolph Gregory received the prize that was laid up for him in heaven when he exchanged his earthly body for an incorruptible heavenly crown.

CHAPTER FIVE



A Heritage of Hope into A New Millenium

While Watergate, Vietnam, Patty Hearst and escalating gas prices were making the headlines in newspapers across America, First Baptist Church was appointing its first Pastor Search Committee in almost a quarter of a century. In January of 1975, the church chose Mrs. Betty Holden Stike to chair the team that would recommend the next pastor. Serving along with her was Mrs. Colon Churchill, Waddell Corbett, Jack Davis, Chester Jones, Bob Kennedy, and James B. Wilson. It would be nine months before they brought a recommendation to the congregation. While the committee was about its task of studying resumes, interviewing candidates and traveling to hear preachers they thought had the potential to be the next pastor of First Baptist Church, new bridges were being crossed back home. Before Rev. and Mrs. Gregory vacated the church manse, organist Arnold Briggs took an option to purchase the property. The proceeds from the sale of the house were used to begin a savings account for the purpose of using the interest earned to provide a housing allowance for the next pastor.³⁷⁵

A report came from the committee responsible for generating funds to pay for the construction of the Activities Center in July of 1975. Mr. Gill Horton proposed a bond program of three hundred twenty-five thousand dollars that would pay eight and one-half percent interest, compounded semi-annually, on ten year maturity, with an option to pay off the bonds before the ten years. The motion passed with the agreement that eighty percent of the bonds were sold to members of the church before the plan was advertised to non-members.³⁷⁶ Mrs. Gilliam Horton recalled, "All the bonds were sold to members of First Baptist. My husband

and a couple of others bought any that were not sold once everyone had the opportunity to buy."³⁷⁷ Betty Murrell said, "When the bonds matured most church members returned them to the church without accepting anything in return. We knew we were making a donation to our future when we bought them."³⁷⁸ Excavation and site improvements began shortly thereafter. By the end of the year, it was obvious that the new building would cost twice as much as projected so one hundred fifty thousand dollars worth of additional bonds were sold to match pledges that had been made. One of the largest gifts came as an in-kind donation from Roy Armstrong. Mr. Armstrong owned a grading and paving company. He provided all of the site work, grading and paving for the Activities Center. The estimated worth of his gift was fifty thousand dollars. Miller Building Corporation began construction of the building when the site work was complete. The entire project was finished and dedicated before the year ended. The final cost, after in-kind gifts, was five hundred forty eight thousand three hundred thirty-one dollars.³⁷⁹

Conflict began to rear its ugly head before a new pastor arrived at First Baptist Church. At an April business conference, the trustees presented a recommendation that the property being used as the YAC (408 Market Street) be sold to a law firm for twenty-five thousand dollars. Dr. John Stike, chairman of the trustees, brought a recommendation at the quarterly business conference, in April of 1984, that the church sell the property. Those in attendance voted to table the motion until the church publicized the offer to better inform the congregation of what was being proposed. In his introductory comments, at the start of the business meeting, one month later, Moderator Jack Davis set the ground rules for the meeting by reading sections of the church constitution dealing with voting regulations and also read six of the twelve rules of order.³⁸⁰ Mr. Davis reiterated that anyone who did not abide by these rules would be removed from the meeting.

Parents and teenagers that enjoyed the use of the property vehemently opposed the recommendation to sell the house. The YAC was a popular place for youngsters that came there for Christian fellowship. Mrs. Janet Kennedy, along with others, created an environment of safety and acceptance for teenagers across the city. Objectors to selling the YAC prior to the completion of the Activities Center turned out in droves and soundly defeated the recommendation of the trustees with only the five trustees voting for the motion. The YAC property was eventually sold, but not until after the dedication of the new Activities Center.

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At the close of the worship service, on Sunday, September 21, the church was called into conference for the purpose of voting on the recommendation of the Pastor Selection Committee. The committee recommended that the church extend a call to Rev. Allen Laymon to become its next pastor. The recommendation of the committee was accepted by acclamation.³⁸¹ Rev. Laymon filled the pulpit as pastor of First Baptist Church on November 2, though the service of installation was not held until November 23. His first order of business came two weeks later when he welcomed Mr. Dick Miller back as Director of Youth and Activities to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of Dale Adkins.

Rev. Laymon was the twenty-sixth pastor to serve the First Baptist Church of Wilmington. The Illinois native did undergraduate work at Bob Jones University and received his formal theological training at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Fort Worth, Texas. Before coming to Wilmington, Rev. Laymon held the pastorate of First Baptist Church in North Wilksboro, North Carolina for seven years. Like the Gregorys before them, the Laymons arrived in Wilmington with three children. "Allen," as he preferred to be called, was an eloquent speaker with an infectious personality whose enthusiasm for life was undeniable. The persuasive pastor with the contagious smile was known to be extremely charming, sometimes to a fault. He found his days at First Baptist to be some of his best and worst. Following an institution like Rev. Gregory brought with it unrecognized challenges. The shadow was larger than most realized, and to his credit, a lesser pastor would never have survived as long as Rev. Laymon. The vivid contrast in their personalities and leadership styles made for interesting days at First Baptist Church.

The diaconate began an innovative ministry to church families after Rev. Gregory announced his retirement. Not knowing how long it would take to get a new pastor, the deacons determined they would need to be responsible for visiting the hospitalized and homebound, and caring for other ministry needs of the congregation. Each deacon agreed to be responsible for ministry to a certain number of families. This ministry continued after Rev. Laymon arrived as pastor, but the deacons felt overwhelmed by the number of families for whom each deacon was responsible. Therefore, the diaconate recommended, and received unanimous support, for a constitutional change in 1976 that expanded their number by eight, bringing the number of deacons to forty.³⁸²

First Baptist Church received three gifts in the fall of 1976. A me-

morial garden along the west side of the sanctuary was created in the name of Claud Efir. A Mason & Hamlin grand piano was placed in the sanctuary as a gift from Mrs. A.H. Yopp in memory of her husband, Alfred, who used his love for music to serve Christ and his church for many years.³⁸³ A new Minister of Education was called to direct the discipleship ministry of the church.

Rev. Johnny Phillips was called as Minister of Education with the understanding that he would begin on January 1, 1977. His pastoral and administrative skills were essential to organizing the Sunday School, beginning a ministry to single adults, filling the pulpit in the absence of the pastor, and serving as a supply preacher in churches of the Wilmington Baptist Association that occasionally called on him.

The sad news of 1976 was that Church Training at First Baptist was dissolved. After years of struggling with low attendance, the decision was made to do away with this program of discipleship ministry. Kenan Maready gave Church Training many years of devoted leadership. No one was more disappointed with the lack of support the church gave to the Sunday afternoon gatherings than Mr. Maready. The fellowship meals in Fireside Hall, and classes for children, teenagers and adults were relegated to memories of days gone by. It would be almost ten years before on-going discipleship training seminars and activities would return to the church.

On November 21, 1976, the First Baptist Church Activities Center at the corner of Independence Boulevard and Canterbury Road was dedicated to God and opened for service. The property acquired by the congregation in 1964, was finally going to be used to provide recreation, fellowship and outreach opportunities for the church. A portion of the dedication service included the following proclamation:

To the end that all who share the hospitality of these walls and these rooms may grow in body, mind, spirit, joy and happiness, and to the end that all who share the warmth and glow within may find courage, trust, confidence and faith, we dedicate this Activities Building to the Glory of God Almighty and to the inspiration of our fellow persons.³⁸⁴

The acquisition of the Sidbury House in 1964, provided additional space for Sunday School classes for thirteen years before the church decided to move their administrative offices into the building in 1977.³⁸⁵

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Members of the congregation rolled up their sleeves and renovated the interior, and painted the exterior in order to make the house comfortable for the staff. Furnishings were also donated.

It was important that members give of their time and talent to such projects because they were not giving enough of their money to meet budget demands. Recognizing the ability to give was available but the desire was lacking, the church employed one of its most-loved members to change the giving attitude. Wallace West was hired to be the Stewardship Counselor of the church in 1977. He was paid as a part-time employee but his work was never finished because his primary function was "to promote a better understanding of our responsibilities to the Lord and the fiscal affairs of the church."³⁸⁶ This is something he did until his dying days.

The choice of Mr. West was a good one for First Baptist. The retired educator was respected by nearly everyone who knew him. He was an innovative thinker, committed Christian, devoted husband and father, Sunday School teacher, and deacon of the church. His duties included that of a financial counselor to the church members in regard to wills, bequests, and trusts, as well as guiding the pledge process for meeting the annual budget. He was unafraid to challenge people to provide generous gifts to their Lord through the ministries of the church. While in his position, Mr. West implemented the plan to have offering envelopes mailed to church members on a monthly basis as a reminder to give. He started "Tithe Demonstration Sundays" and "Catch-Up" days throughout the year in order to assure the church of meeting its budget.

Wallace West was a layman of the caliber of George French, Benjamin Mitchell, C.D. Ellis, and Alfred Alderman who came before him. Carl Warwick described him as, "a man who loved people and wanted the best for everyone he knew. He never gave up on anyone; certainly not me. Wallace West loved his God, his family and his church more than anything."³⁸⁷ Wallace resigned from his paid position in 1979, though he was called on to assist with the annual pledging process of the congregation for several more years.

First Baptist called its first Minister of Recreation and Youth in June of 1978.³⁸⁸ Rev. Don Vigus was graduated from Memphis State University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, with degrees in recreation and divinity. He arrived in Wilmington, in an MG convertible to implement and direct a ministry plan for the Activities Center and work with teenagers. Though his title and responsibilities have been adjusted

to accommodate his time and interests over the past thirty years, Rev. Vigus continues to be an effective and vital part of the church staff.

Don was charged with keeping the Activities Center open and providing church wide recreation in his early days. Basketball, volleyball, baseball and softball teams were started that have evolved into entire leagues. Hunting, fishing, skiing, rafting trips and tours for children through the oldest adults have been enjoyed by thousands. Summer camps, weekend retreats, mission trips and fun get away adventures were as much a lifestyle as a job for Rev. Vigus. He has guided children, teenagers, their parents, college students, single adults and senior adults for the past thirty years. His office is now downtown rather than at the Activities Center where he started. He is now only responsible for ministry to teenagers and their families.

There are over two hundred teenagers involved in a youth group that is constantly growing in faith and sharing it with others through large and small group gatherings. Rev. Vigus has become a mentor to many youth ministers in the city and across North Carolina. In introducing Don Vigus to First Baptist Church, Rebecca Laymon wrote in the *Kingdom News*, "He's a warm, personable, genuine young man whom I know you are going to enjoy and appreciate."³⁸⁹ Her opinion has been shared by thousands of people in the last quarter century. Don Vigus is an institution in youth ministry and his years of effectiveness are living proof.

First Baptist Church ordained its first female deacon in 1978. Mrs. Betty Stike holds that distinction. She had been a member of the church for over thirty years. In that time she served on numerous committees, taught Sunday School, directed the WMU and was Chairperson of the Pastor Selection committee that recommended Rev. Laymon. The church felt Betty Stike fit the description of what a deacon was to be and did not think gender should be a discriminating factor. Miss Helen Dobson was ordained in 1985, and Miriam Baggett followed in 1986. In 2008, there are fifteen female members of the fifty-six person diaconate.

First Baptist Church began two traditions in 1979, that have grown in attendance since their genesis. Easter sunrise services are held annually at several locations around Wilmington. Community services on the *USS North Carolina*, at Oleander Gardens Cemetery and on the sand at Wrightsville Beach are well attended and members of First Baptist were participants until Waddell and Bitsy Corbett opened the gardens at Airlie for the church to have their own service. Gathering at sunrise under the mammoth Live Oak trees with blooming azaleas and Bradley

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Creek serving as a backdrop has afforded the church an atmosphere to celebrate the resurrection of Christ like no other. Hundreds of people from across the Cape Fear region now look forward to meeting at Airlie Gardens at sunrise for an Easter resurrection celebration every year.

The other tradition that started in 1979, is the annual Thanksgiving Wildlife Banquet. The church family brings side dishes to complement prepared wild game, ham and turkey for a smorgasbord dinner that is second to none. A program is planned for everyone after enjoying the meal together. At the conclusion of the evening, the church shares Holy Communion around the dinner tables. This gathering has now outgrown the Activities Center and the ministerial staff is faced with the challenge of continuing the tradition in more creative ways.

A ministry that ended in 1979, was the radio broadcast of Sunday morning worship services. First Baptist Church, for a number of years, contracted with a local station, WMFD, to provide a live broadcast. In the spring of that year, the radio station decided not to renew its contract with the church. First Baptist has not chosen to broadcast or televise its worship services since.

The 1970s closed with First Baptist Church planning a complete renovation of the sixty year old educational building. Cosmetic updates and periodic painting was no longer solving the constant complaints of church members or the escalating maintenance costs incurred to repair the deteriorating building. On June 8, 1980, the Educational Building Renovation Committee brought a report that called for a complete overhaul of the building. A recommendation was made and passed that the church accepts the report and begin planning for ways to fund the renovation. Dr. Robert Fales was disappointed with the decision and shared his desire that the church consider building a new educational building at the Independence Boulevard site. He urged the congregation, "...not to sidetrack or postpone the unlimited possibilities of this site. I feel in the future, it is essential to erect a building on this site. There would probably be 1,000 to 1,500 in Sunday School every Sunday morning."³⁹⁰

Dr. Fales was a visionary leader that the church chose not to follow in this matter. This writer believes they made a huge mistake by not gleaning more of his wisdom. The average attendance in Sunday School was two hundred eighty at that time. It took until 2004 to reach an average attendance in Sunday School of five hundred people.

Two funds were created in 1980, as a result of large financial gifts provided to the church. Mrs. Hilda Cameron Echols presented a gift of

two hundred ten thousand dollars and a gift of stock that exceeded three hundred thousand dollars was received from the estate of Mr. Glenn J. McClellan. First Baptist has benefited from the generosity of these two donors from that year forward. The church has been able to do multiple ministries as a result of these gifts and the interest that has accrued in the funds. The congregation was now meeting its budget and the church was included in the wills of a number of members as a result of the tireless dedication of Wallace West. The fruit of his labor will benefit First Baptist Church for many years to come.

The annual budget exceeded three hundred thousand dollars for the first time in 1981. While this was an achievement of sorts, the church would take an aggressive financial "leap of faith" during the year that was a higher mountain than they had ever climbed. At a business conference in May of 1981, with only eighty-eight members present, a report, and subsequent recommendation was brought by a special study committee concerning the renovation of the educational building. The committee recommended that the church authorize a construction budget of seven hundred thousand dollars to renovate the building.³⁹¹ The motion passed. There was not yet a plan in place for how to pay for the renovations and any additions. Some thought the church could use the balance available in the newly created funds and any other funds the church may have but wiser people prevailed and the funds were not depleted to renovate the building. After careful consideration the church determined it would be best to enter a pledge campaign and complete the renovations in three phases in order to "pay as we go."

Mrs. Hilda Cameron Echols put forth a matching one hundred thousand dollar challenge to the church. It took six years, and better than eight hundred thousand dollars to complete the project. Members of the finance committee faced the challenges of having to decide which bills would be paid when they met each month. Ed Efird, Dr. Jimmy Smith and Kenan Maready shouldered the majority of this responsibility with assistance from others. Annual increases in the budget were minimal as some members of the church were designating their offerings to the renovation project rather than supporting the unified budget.

In March of 1983, the church was presented with the chance to expand its downtown campus when the Von Glahn House located beside the Sidbury House became available. This house had a similar floor plan as the Sidbury House but downtown real estate had appreciated dramatically since the church purchased the house from Dr. Sidbury twenty

years earlier. An offer of at least ninety-five thousand dollars would be required in order for the church to have a chance at buying the property.³⁹² As the congregation discussed the advantages and disadvantages they concluded it would not be prudent to borrow money in order to expand downtown while they were still in the process of paying off the sale of bonds for the construction of the Activities Center and trying to renovate the educational building. Some members regret not buying the house when they had the chance because the Von Glahn House could serve as Sunday School classrooms or an urban ministry center. There are also some who regret the church did not purchase the Rainey Chevrolet property (current Jo Ann Carter Hareison Center) when it was first available. However, there is no evidence that the church ever had the opportunity to purchase that property. Legend has it that the church could have bought half of the downtown block for fifty thousand dollars, but that is only legend.

Rumors concerning the pastor's private life were beginning to spread in the church and community in 1984. Marital tension became obvious to members of the church and Rev. Laymon's professional performance began to suffer. Members of the diaconate accepted a larger role as ministers to the congregation while the pastor concentrated on matters at home. Those leading the way included young men like Tony Lopatka, Kit Austin, Ed Efird, John Smith, Joe Sutton, and Bob Parker. Older members of the diaconate like Percy Hedquist, Betty Stike, Jim Fitzgerald, Calvin Doss, Helen Dobson, Chester Jones, Elmer Higgins, Miriam Baggett, Kenan Maready, Sam Bissette, Bud Davis, Herb Fisher, Leon Brogden, Garland Garrett, Sr., and Lee Porter provided stability for a church that was feeling the affects of internal conflict. Their wisdom and leadership were vital for managing a congregation that could have easily fallen into despair.

The church received almost seven hundred new members during the first eight years of Rev. Laymon's ministry but the resident membership had increased by less than one hundred fifty. The average Sunday School attendance was showing an increase of eight over the same period. The church budget was increasing each year, and gifts to building projects and special funds were enormous, but giving to mission causes was stagnant. The church was unbalanced but few recognized it. Rev. Laymon was loved and respected by many in the congregation for his eloquent sermons and the tenderness he showed in ministering to them in times of struggle. His personal struggles disappointed some members whose

expectations were higher than he was able to fulfill. Some members claimed to be embarrassed by their perception of a lack of integrity on the part of their pastor.

In October of 1985, Allen Laymon resigned amidst growing congregational turmoil and confusion. Some members felt he should have stepped down months earlier; others were saddened by his decision to leave. A cadre of church members thought the church had forced their pastor to resign at a time when he needed to be cared for by the congregation. Tears of joy, anger, and heartbreak were shed by many. Rev. Laymon wrote in resigning:

You have been my support group, confidants, advisors, correctors, forgivers of my weaknesses, and celebrators of my strengths. You have been more than I could have ever dreamed possible. Our relationship together has surpassed my highest expectations. It is now time for me to make a new beginning in another place.³⁹³

The new place of ministry for one of the finest orators to ever grace the pulpit of First Baptist Church was Union Theological Seminary, in Richmond, Virginia, where he taught homiletics. Rev. Laymon eventually returned to the pastorate when he accepted a call to the Park Road Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

One of the most significant things Rev. Laymon led First Baptist to do during his ten year tenure was to change their policy concerning the admission of new members. Prior to his coming to Wilmington, the congregation required all members to be baptized by immersion. Those who wished to join the church by transfer of their membership from a church of another denomination that did not baptize by immersion had to be immersed in order to join First Baptist. Rev. Laymon asked the congregation to consider allowing those who had received a "believer's baptism" by any mode, or who had been through "confirmation" in another Christian faith tradition, to join First Baptist without the requirement of being immersed, or re-baptized. After studying the issue for several months, and considering the effect this constitutional change may have on the church and its relationship to other Baptist bodies, First Baptist voted to make an adjustment to the constitution. The church's policy on baptism now reads:

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Persons who are members of other Christian fellowships may unite with First Baptist Church by transfer of letter or statement of faith. The specific requirement of Christian baptism for membership in the Church may be waived when, in the opinion of the pastor, it is physically or mentally impractical.³⁹⁴

First Baptist is one of only a few Baptist churches with such an open policy on receiving new members. This openness has provided the avenue for membership to many people who otherwise would not have considered joining the church. The decision Rev. Laymon led the church to make concerning baptism is one of the reasons First Baptist has grown as it has in the last twenty years. The issue of baptism by immersion is no longer a barrier to receiving those who firmly believe their experience of baptism, by whatever mode, was a significant event in their faith journey.

First Baptist lost two other leaders in 1985, who gave of themselves to assure the betterment of the church. In a letter to Mrs. Jack Sneed, dated May 13, 1985, the deacons wrote:

Jack's genuine friendliness, his devotion to duty, his keen sense of humor, his understanding tolerance, his efficiency in business, his sympathetic concern for others—these marked him as an influential deacon and leader.

Crowded into a comparatively brief span of years, many facets of activity felt the quiet power and cooperative spirit of this man. Many are the lives he influenced along the way.

We shall always remember Jack's vibrancy, and each of us will be forever grateful for the benediction of a life well-lived.³⁹⁵

Later in the year the church celebrated the life of Gilliam Horton. The diaconate passed the statement appearing as Appendix Nineteen acknowledging their appreciation for the life he lived and the contribution he made to First Baptist Church.

Randolph Gregory stepped out of retirement to become Interim Pastor two weeks after the resignation of Rev. Allen Laymon. Feelings were raw for most members and the wisdom and experience of the Pastor Emeritus was vital. Rev. Johnny Phillips provided pastoral care and a

pulpit presence during these tumultuous days. He also presided over staff meetings and represented the church in associational and convention meetings. Some people said he wanted to be the next pastor, and there were members of the church who wanted him to step up. The general consensus of the congregation though, was that the new pastor needed to be divorced from the recent events surrounding Rev. Laymon's departure.

In the aftermath of the resignation of Rev. Laymon, Arnold Briggs retired on December 22, 1985. He served as organist and led the music ministry of the church for seventeen years. His devotion to this ministry was appreciated by members of the Chancel Choir, but graded choirs suffered during his tenure. The congregation looked, again to Helen Dobson to guide this ministry during the interim.

In March of 1986, Jeff Lewis was called as Organist-Choirmaster. This accomplished organist came to First Baptist from Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He brought a flair for playing the organ, and piano, like the church had not had since Henri Emurian. Jeff was a young man who longed to see the entire church, including the children and teenagers, worshipping God through the gift of music. He convinced the church that there was a place for contemporary and classical music in worship. Jeff enlisted a team of volunteers to lead a graded program of music for children while he concentrated on building a youth choir. The music committee encouraged the church to enlarge the music budget by several thousand dollars to allow the new organist the opportunity to purchase new music for the Chancel Choir. Members of the congregation who resisted joining the choir under the previous Minister of Music now filled the choir loft every Sunday. Still, without a pastor in place, a vital part of the ministry team was missing.

In May of 1986, Faye Hilburn resigned as financial secretary after thirteen years of service to the church. This vacancy created yet another hole in the dwindling church staff. Few people were as trusted as Mrs. Hilburn. She watched the church budget increase from one hundred thirty-five thousand dollars to more than four hundred thirty thousand dollars since she began in 1973. Faye led First Baptist into the age of computers. Hers may have been the most difficult job on staff as she was constantly overseeing the receipts and expenditures of a church that often barely met its bills. Ed Efird recalled his first meeting on the finance committee when an elderly veteran of the committee told him, "If the church does-

n't meet the budget, members of this committee go into our pockets to make up the difference."³⁹⁶ He said he started to resign before the gentleman smiled and told him "that is the way it used to be."

Mrs. Marie Lane followed Mrs. Hilburn as financial secretary and continues serving in this capacity in 2008. The financial standing of the church has improved immensely over the last twenty-one years.

Kenan Maready was elected Chairman of the Pastor Search Committee. Other members included J. Corpening, Ann Brown, Sam Bisette, Joe Sutton, Naomi Pridgen, and Jimmy Jackson. Mr. Maready brought a report to the monthly deacons meeting in May indicating that the committee had invited Dr. Michael Queen to be the guest of the church at a reception on Wednesday, May 28. The purpose of the reception was to introduce Dr. Queen, and his family, to the church. Following congregational approval on June 15, the committee prepared a written agreement that was signed by Dr. Queen and the Chairman of the Pastor Search Committee. He began his duties as pastor on August 9, and was installed on September 14, 1986.

Dr. Mike Queen came to be pastor of First Baptist Church from First Baptist in Greensboro, North Carolina where he served as Associate Pastor for the previous five years. The West Virginia native graduated from Wake Forest University in 1968, and returned home to manage a family-owned business before entering Southeastern Seminary ten years later. Upon graduation, he was called to the Greensboro church as Assistant Pastor with the hope of learning the practical and professional skills of pastoring from one of North Carolina's finest mentors, Dr. Alton McEachern.

Five years later, Mike Queen was given the opportunity to put into practice what he learned in the classroom and on the field. First Baptist Church in Greensboro was one of the largest churches in North Carolina, and Mike Queen's administrative skills, extroverted personality, sense of intentionality, and ability to motivate others was one of the reasons. He would need these traits and the wisdom gleaned from other experienced pastors in order to bring some semblance of stability to a fractured Wilmington church. Mike Queen and members of the Pastor Search Committee that spent time with him during the hours of interviews and conversation were convinced God was bringing them together for such a time as this.

With a commitment to pray for, and with each other, Mike Queen and the members who presented him to First Baptist Church embarked on a jour-

ney that has lasted more than twenty years. In his first letter to the congregation Dr. Queen's honesty and excitement was evident when he wrote:

There is a marvelous exhilaration in doing something for the "first" time. I am feeling that as I prepare to speak to you on Sunday. As newcomers to this city and church, we (his wife Bobbie and children Brett and Amy) share a common experience. At one time, you also were new to this place. You have made a home here; so shall we. We look forward to getting to know each of you personally. We have recently experienced a lot of change, but we are truly "open" to the future. You will experience some changes also. Every person is different. I am no exception. No doubt, I will do things differently than that to which you are accustomed. Bear with me as we learn one another's ways. As we begin together, remember that you do not need me. You need Christ. He will fill our spirits and forgive our sin. That is amazing grace. That hope is our faith. May we live out that faith as we share our joys and hurts in love for one another.³⁹⁷

Dr. Queen admits he was not a first-rate preacher when he began his pastorate but that has changed. In 1996, he was invited to deliver the annual sermon at the Baptist State Convention. Bob Parker once told the new pastor, "Your preaching was so bad I didn't know if you were going to make it through the first year, and I was less convinced that I would." Both men survived their first year together and enjoy a long-lasting friendship and healthy respect for each other. Good preaching was not what First Baptist Church needed in the early days of Dr. Queen's ministry with them. The early victories for the new pastor were not won in the pulpit, but in meetings with scarred members and prospects looking for a church home.

Eleven new members joined First Baptist in the first four weeks of Dr. Queen's pastorate. The proposed budget prepared by the finance committee for 1987 reflected a decrease from 1986. The committee thought it prudent to reduce the budget because projections reflected the congregation would not meet the demand of the existing budget. Dr. Queen urged the committee to push forward rather than conceding defeat and retreating. The projection for 1986 rang true and the church did not meet the budget, but the idealistic new pastor was per-

suasive enough to convince the finance committee to raise the bar. The budget for the coming year was increased seventy-two dollars over 1986. The congregation did not meet the budget goal in 1987, but they gave more than the church had ever given and had a feeling of accomplishment.

Mike Queen acquired a staff that consisted of a Minister of Education with nine years of experience, a Minister of Youth, Recreation and Senior Adults with nine years experience, a Minister of Music who had been on board for five months, a financial secretary with less than a year under her belt, and an administrative secretary who began in 1975. They were looking for a leader, and they found one.

After being an associate pastor for five years, Rev. Queen knew what it was like to be a staff member. He understood the dynamics of often working behind the scenes while the pastor got the accolades. He also knew his future success, and the ultimate success of the church depended on the guidance of a cohesive ministerial team. The foundation was laid when the pastor proposed that the church lower his salary and raise the salaries of the support staff. Dr. Queen thought the gap was too wide between the salaries and he wanted the problem remedied early on. The church followed his lead and the staff members appreciated his support.

Church records indicated First Baptist had one thousand seventy resident members in 1986.³⁹⁸ There were approximately five hundred people in worship on a given Sunday and three hundred in Sunday School. Members were kind to the new pastor and his family but not everyone went out of their way to welcome them into the church. "It was a strange time," Dr. Queen remembers. "There were members who were angry by the recent departure of the former pastor. Some of them took out their anger on me because I was a symbol of the transition."³⁹⁹ The issues within First Baptist Church were greater than the new pastor could have conceived, but he was convinced God placed him in this situation for a purpose and God would provide what was needed.

The sanctuary of the church provided a beautiful place to worship, but the basement of the educational building leaked and was uninhabitable most Sundays. Renovations were still progressing as the church continued trying to dress up an old building. Fewer than one hundred adults and children took part in discipleship studies, children's choirs, and mission activities. With Christmas approaching, Dr. Queen and Jeff Lewis, the Organist/Choirmaster, decided to take a chance on the mem-

bers coming downtown on a Sunday night. The two newest staff members planned a "Hanging of the Greens" service for December 7, 1986. They organized a program that included children, teenagers, and adults singing, playing instruments, joining the congregation in singing hymns, and leading special readings while groups decorated the sanctuary with wreaths, poinsettias, garland and candles. The sanctuary was filled and the congregants commented that the service was one of the best things that had happened at First Baptist Church in years. Dr. Queen and Jeff Lewis embraced as the last members left the sanctuary. They agreed that they took their place as Pastor and Minister of Music that night. The "Hanging of the Greens" service became a regular part of the Advent season for First Baptist Church.

Dr. Queen's goal for the next twelve months was to meet as many members as possible and to become involved in the life of the community. He joined a Rotary Club, agreed to serve as a district chairman for the United Way, took part in activities with the Wilmington Baptist Association, and met regularly with pastors of other downtown churches.

In 1988, the family ministry plan of the diaconate was adjusted and expanded to include non-deacons as ministry leaders. Under the guidance of Joe Sutton, training sessions were conducted to equip as many members as possible to minister to the congregation. Each trained person was assigned up to seven families they were to contact and visit regularly so in times of need or celebration, church members would minister to each other. The new plan was called "Shared Ministry" and added a new component to the church. Deacons had provided visits and served communion to homebound members for years, and members of the diaconate—led by Onree Fisher and John Clayton—conducted times of worship at a nearby retirement center, Catherine Kennedy Home, but "Shared Ministry" was an attempt to minister to the entire church. The plan worked well for a few years but interest waned in the mid-90s and was replaced with a plan for Sunday School class members to minister to each other.

The deacons also began to study the actions of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1988. Recent decisions and remarks by conservative Convention leaders who were steering it away from its original focus caused First Baptist to appoint a Denominational Relations Committee to stay informed of actions by Convention leadership and keep the church abreast. Bob Parker spearheaded this team. He immersed himself in the effort by writing letters and making phone calls to leaders of the various agencies and boards of the Convention. First Baptist Church sent a full

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complement of messengers to each annual meeting. Reports from Mr. Parker and other members of the church became a regular part of business conferences.

Twenty more new members joined First Baptist in the first couple of months of 1988. A new Sunday School class was begun for young couples. The pre-school area was growing as young families were finding First Baptist to be a place they wanted to grow in their relationship with Christ. The choir loft was beginning to fill and Jeff Lewis reported forty-eight adults had enrolled in the Chancel Choir.⁴⁰⁰ Sixty teenagers enrolled in the youth choir and thirty were now attending. The youth group had at least that many participating in Sunday night activities.

Over the next ten months a number of adjustments were made in order for the church to become more welcoming and efficient. At the insistence of the pastor, the deacons committed to become more intentional at greeting guests and unfamiliar church members each Sunday. The goal was to increase the level of warmth displayed within the church family. The pastor committed to visiting in the homes of those who visited First Baptist. The standard for being a deacon was revised and expectations of deacons were raised. Each deacon was expected to attend Sunday School regularly, tithe, invite prospective members to join them in worship, pray daily, and support the pastor.

The church did not meet its budget in 1988, but increased its giving from the previous year. Again, Dr. Queen encouraged the finance committee to challenge the congregation by raising the budget for 1989. He sensed the best days were ahead for a church that was feeling good about whom they were.

In 1989, the year began with the appointment of a "Self-Study Task Force," whose assignment was to analyze every aspect of First Baptist Church. The task force was used to determine strengths and weaknesses of the church. John Smith chaired the diaconate and directed this two-year effort that involved more than one hundred members assigned to various commissions. The goal was to begin preparing the church for the twenty-first century.

The task force proposed an increase in mission involvement, a reduction in the number of standing committees, a renovation of the chancel and pulpit area of the sanctuary, increased emphasis on Christian education and discipleship training, and a new intentionality toward evangelism. The congregation embraced the findings and recommendations of the task force by approving their report in the fall of 1990.⁴⁰¹

The new committee structure called for a reduction from twenty-six committees to eleven. Each committee would have between nine and fifteen members who would meet on a monthly basis. A staff member would serve as liaison to each committee in order to provide guidance and answer questions. The primary committees were Children's Ministry, Financial Management, Missions and Ministry, Property Management, Worship, Personnel, and Youth. The Fellowship Fund, Trustees, Audit and Archives committees were smaller and met as needed. This new system has worked well since its implementation.

On July 16, 1989, First Baptist Church ordained its first female minister.⁴⁰² Ann Charles-Craft was a public school teacher who was a member of the singles ministry of First Baptist when she felt God leading her into vocational ministry. She served as a summer intern at First Baptist during her seminary days at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. After graduation she was called as Minister to Children and Single Adults by Trinity Baptist Church in Raleigh. The Raleigh congregation concurred with First Baptist Church in Wilmington that Ann's character and commitment to serving God merited ordination and First Baptist set her apart after she met with an ordination council. It would be almost fifteen years before the Wilmington congregation ordained another woman to the gospel ministry. Mrs. Jayne Hugo Davis became Rev. Davis in a special worship service in January of 2004. Rev. Davis serves as Minister of Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development at First Baptist currently.

The Wilmington church partnered with the Baptist State Convention by sending two teams of volunteers on mission trips to Brazil in 1989. These were the first of many teams First Baptist would send to do volunteer mission work around the world. Teams have journeyed to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Bimini, Jamaica, Kosovo, Antigua, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Nova Scotia, Thailand, China, Honduras, Chile, and Guatemala, all within the last ten years.

In a business meeting, held on October 15, 1989, the church decided it was time to make adjustments in the way it was financially supporting the Southern Baptist Convention. The Convention was being firmly controlled by a fundamentalist regime. Seminary presidents and professors were being fired or forced to resign because of unfounded reports of liberal theological leanings. Threats were made to leaders of Baptist agencies and mission boards. The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs was being de-funded by the Convention.

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First Baptist Church had been a team player since the Convention was conceived in 1845. The church supported the mission causes of the Convention and was a strong supporter of the Cooperative Program since its beginning. However, over the last ten years the Convention had taken a course that eliminated participation in decision-making by churches that practiced the Priesthood of all Believers and respected the autonomy of each church. First Baptist did not force the issue of the inerrancy of scripture on its members and practiced the ordination of women as deacons and ministers. The church was labeled "liberal" in the eyes of many Southern Baptists because of its policies concerning baptism, the ordination of women, and the interpretation of scripture. With no seat at the table, and the idea that there would be no more opportunities for members to be invited to take part in leadership roles in the Convention, First Baptist decided to give each member the option of continuing to provide financial support to the Southern Baptist Convention or directing their mission dollars elsewhere. Eighty-five percent of the membership chose to by-pass the Southern Baptist Convention. The other fifteen percent of the membership wanted to continue supporting the Convention and their wishes were granted.

First Baptist has always made it a practice of allowing the minority vote to have a voice in the financial support of missions. For the next ten years an even smaller percentage of the church chose to support the Southern Baptist Convention and they were allowed to do so without being made to feel uncomfortable. However, after years of attending Convention meetings, writing letters, making phone calls, and many members spending an enormous number of hours discussing and praying about the church's relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention, First Baptist officially severed its tie.

In a business conference, held on January 21, 2001, approximately three hundred members voted in favor of a motion brought by an appointed "Denominational Affiliation Committee" chaired by John Martin.⁴⁰³ The motion was to revise the church's Constitution by removing the words "Southern Baptist Convention" from the list of groups the church chooses to support. Three members voted against the motion. This was a sad day for the church that had messengers present at the founding of the Convention, but the Convention that First Baptist helped to birth had chosen to go in a direction that no longer operated under the principles, policies and beliefs by which it was founded.

In the fall of 1990, the church sent representatives to a called meet-

ing in Atlanta. Dr. Daniel Vestal, a Baptist pastor from Texas, invited disenfranchised Southern Baptists to come together for the purpose of talking about options and alternatives to supporting a Convention that no longer wanted to have fellowship with Baptists who would not march to their command. From this meeting evolved the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship which offered mission opportunities for Baptists who were displaced by the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. First Baptist threw its support behind this new venture that has grown into a mission delivery ministry with missionaries who serve unreached people groups around the globe.

Eric Porterfield served as the second Youth Ministry intern during the summer of 1989. Eric grew up at First Baptist Church in Greensboro and was a college student sensing God's call to vocational ministry. Upon graduating from Wofford College, Eric continued his education at the Baptist House of Studies in the divinity school at Duke University. Today, Eric serves as pastor of Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington, a church that was started by First Baptist.

In the fall of 1989, the church began a Wednesday evening program that included dinner, mission activities, choir for children, and discipleship seminars for teenagers and adults. This was the first on-going evening activity attempted by the downtown church since the curfews of the early 1970s. Attendance was slow at first but grew over time. The schedule called for all activities to end by seven p.m.. The plan was to conduct two thirteen week semesters. The first semester ended in early December. The second semester began in January, and concluded before Easter. The church embraced the format after the first year and this ministry continues today.

The fall also saw the beginning of "Fifty Plus," a ministry activity for couples over the age of fifty years old. These couples met monthly at the Activities Center to enjoy a catered meal together, and a program of sorts. The friendships built by these socials helped to continue creating the friendly atmosphere within First Baptist Church. Entertainment at Fifty Plus gatherings has included impersonators of Elvis Presley, Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton.

At the same time, Wake Forest University began to investigate the possibility of beginning a divinity school and asked Mike Queen to lead the way. He was serving as a trustee of the institution at the time. A three month study indicated the need for such a school at Wake Forest but financial restraints would not allow it at that time. First Baptist made a

commitment to provide financial support for such a school and encouraged Dr. Queen to inquire of other churches to do the same. The Wilmington pastor immersed himself in a venture to secure the money needed to start the new program of study. It would take about ten years before the financial base was such that Wake Forest could begin the school for advanced theological training but with the support of First Baptist and many others, the dream became a reality.

Sunday School attendance continued to rise through 1989. The average attendance grew to three hundred forty. In the hope that this was more than just an anomaly, a team of deacons approached the City of Wilmington about the church being allowed the first option to purchase the former Wilmington Light Infantry Armory beside of the church in order to have room for its expanding Sunday School ministry. The city was using the building for office space but rumors were spreading that it would soon be vacated. Though parts of the building were almost one hundred fifty years old, the location was perfect for expanding the First Baptist downtown campus. It would be seven more years before the church was given the chance to buy the building.

In addition to the growth in membership, Sunday School attendance, worship attendance and the new discipleship opportunity on Wednesday evenings, First Baptist met its budget for the first time in several years. One of the reasons for this may have been a new system of pledging that was implemented by Dr. Queen.

Each First Baptist family received a letter explaining the new system along with a financial pledge card in early November of 1988. The Sunday before Thanksgiving was the designated day the completed cards were to be returned. That day, as an act of worship, the congregation was invited to come forward and place their completed cards on the communion table. The table was covered in fruit, nuts and vegetables to symbolize the fall harvest. Families processed to the table and placed their financial commitment card among the harvest God had provided for God's children. Most members see this service as extremely moving while a few intentionally stay away because they believe bringing cards to the front of the sanctuary attracts personal attention.

First Baptist has made it a custom to do something similar during Advent. It is called "White Christmas." Congregants are asked to bring a gift of food, toys or clothing to the worship service on the Sunday before Christmas. Each member is invited to bring their gift to the front of the sanctuary and place it around the Chrismon tree at a designated time in

the service. It is one of the most moving worship services of the year. After the Benediction is pronounced, members of the Youth Group divide the gifts and deliver them to needy families in the community.

Rev. Johnny Phillips resigned as Minister of Education at the beginning of 1990.⁴⁰⁴ The void created additional work for the rest of the staff as the church membership exceeded twelve hundred in March. The Personnel Committee was in the process of evaluating job descriptions at the time. A plan was being implemented to assign staff ministers the responsibilities that best suited their strengths rather than asking them to perform in areas where they were not gifted. The plan was put into place with the calling of Rev. Jim Everette in July.

Rev. Everette filled the vacant Minister of Education position, but the job description was changed upon his arrival. One of Rev. Phillips' responsibilities was to manage the facilities, but Rev. Everette had little interest or experience in doing such. He had a passion for serving the needy, the hurting, and the broken people in society who have no advocate. First Baptist wanted to begin touching its community with love by enlisting members to give of themselves in local mission activities. Rev. Everette's position became "Minister of Education and Missions," while Rev. Jeff Lewis began managing the downtown facilities. An immediate emphasis was placed on the importance of every member becoming involved in a ministry of their choosing. Some members served within First Baptist while others began taking part in local mission endeavors.

Rev. Everette helped open the eyes of church members to the many opportunities that surrounded them. The congregation responded enthusiastically by committing money, time and energy to making a positive difference in Wilmington. Better than four hundred members now take part in on-going ministry opportunities in the Cape Fear region. Local agencies like the Domestic Violence Center, Lower Cape Fear Hospice, Habitat for Humanity, Good Shepherd Ministries, St. James Overnight Shelter, Wilmington Interfaith Hospitality Network, Mercy House, Yahweh Center, Mother Hubbard's Cupboard, and others receive volunteer support from First Baptist. These agencies, and others, are also included in the mission budget. There is also a team from First Baptist that leads weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings with inmates at the New Hanover County Jail.

First Baptist Church now has the reputation for providing volunteer and financial assistance when ministry needs arise in Wilmington. The church is also known for helping when disasters occur. Ministry teams

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gave of themselves and their possessions in providing relief to the victims of Hurricane Hugo in Charleston, South Carolina; Hurricane Andrew in Homestead, Florida; Hurricane Mitch in Honduras; Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast, boxes of food were sent to Northern Thailand, Iraq, Southern Thailand, and Kosovo. The First Baptist Activities Center was a feeding site and area command center for the American Red Cross in the days following Hurricane Fran in 1996, and Floyd in 1999. The church has traveled northward to Boston, as far south as Bayou La Batre, Alabama, and as far west as New Mexico and Utah on summer mission trips within the United States. First Baptist members have taken mission action to heart.

The door to Wilmington was opened wide in 1990, with the completion of Interstate Forty. The port city was now connected to the rest of North Carolina, but also to corporate America. The city that boasted the highest population in the state in 1900, and again in 1945, as a result of World War II, became a sleepy city known for its Azalea Festival in the spring and its close proximity to the beach, until 1990. The interstate linked Wilmington to the Research Triangle of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill. The state port became busy again with cargo carriers importing and exporting goods to America. The population of New Hanover County grew by thirty-three percent over the next ten years, and with the rise in population came a growth spurt for First Baptist Church that has continued into the twenty-first century.

In April of 1991, a report from the Buildings Renovation committee was presented at a quarterly business conference. This committee was appointed as a result of the church's approval of the report from the Self-Study Task Force, in 1990. Kit Austin chaired the committee that included Bud Davis, Dr. John Stike, Beth Upton, Mary Keith, Jack Davis, and Carlton Fisher. The recommendation of the committee was that the pulpit and chancel areas be renovated in the sanctuary. The purpose of the renovation was to provide additional space for the growth of the Chancel Choir and to make the baptistry more visible.

The original design of the sanctuary was such that the choir was in a true loft above the pulpit. There was room for only thirty members in the loft. The organ was also located in the loft. The baptistry was situated behind the pulpit which created viewing problems for parishioners. The location of the baptistry also meant the lectern had to be removed on the last Sunday of each month when new believers were baptized. After considerable discussion concerning the proposed renovation, a vote was

taken and a large majority of the approximate three hundred members who were present agreed with the recommendation of the committee. The new design called for moving the pulpit closer to the congregation, the organ and Chancel Choir were moved down behind the pulpit, and the baptistery elevated so members could now more easily see those being baptized. The sanctuary was renovated during the summer of 1992. First Baptist Church met in nearby Thalian Hall for worship services during the five months of renovation. The newly configured sanctuary was dedicated on October 18, 1992.

Kenan Maready and Bob Parker were appointed as Co-Chairmen of the "Visions and Dreams" Capital Campaign needed to pay for sanctuary renovations, repairs to the exterior of the downtown buildings, purchase a bus and two vans, and upgrade the interior and grounds at the Activities Center. The campaign was conducted during the summer and fall of 1991. The goal of the campaign was to raise one million sixty-three thousand dollars that would be given over the following three years. After months of work, the campaign team recognized that the goal would not be realized. Still, the church would not be denied from accomplishing as much of their dream as possible. The sanctuary was renovated, repairs were completed to the downtown buildings, new vehicles were purchased as they were able to be afforded, and minor adjustments were made at the Activities Center.

Four new Sunday School classes for adults were started in 1991. A surge in the number of children now attending the church called for a new part-time staff position. Mrs. Sandy Rushing began working ten hours per week as Director of Children's Ministries.

Church membership decreased in 1991, due to a purging of the membership roll. Better than three hundred members who had not been in contact with the church over the last ten years were removed from the church roll. A team was given the responsibility of contacting these members to inquire of their interest in continuing to be a part of the church. Some did, but most asked that their name be removed as a result of their relocating to another city, joining another church, or lack of involvement in First Baptist. Worship and Sunday School attendance continued to increase in 1991. By year's end, there was an average of five hundred sixteen worshippers and three hundred sixty-four in Sunday School every Sunday.

The church made a decision to designate its Easter offering in 1991, to a new local venture rather than support the Home Mission Board of

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the Southern Baptist Convention. In keeping its commitment to becoming more active in local mission efforts, First Baptist partnered with the Baptist State Convention, Wilmington Baptist Association, Greenfield Baptist Church in Wilmington, and Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina to provide the salary for a minister to begin work in the inner-city of Wilmington. Rev. Jeff Brooks was the first person to serve in this position which eventually became an effort of First Baptist and the Wilmington Baptist Association. Rev. Brooks resigned after a couple of years and Rev. David Brisson filled the position that is now completely funded by the Wilmington Baptist Association.

The congregation chose to do something similar with its Christmas missions offering. Rather than sending money to the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, First Baptist received an offering for the International Baptist Seminary located in Ruschlikon, Switzerland. The seminary was being de-funded by the Mission Board as part of the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. First Baptist believed in the ministry being provided by the seminary and supported it as such. The church would also provide teams of volunteers to assist in the relocation of the seminary from Ruschlikon to Prague, Czech Republic a few years later.

First Baptist helped to begin another vital ministry in September. In partnership with North Carolina Baptist Hospital and the Wilmington Baptist Association, First Baptist started the Baptist Counseling Center. Dr. Mac Wallace served as the first resident counselor. This ministry has evolved into a program that now includes four offices in the Cape Fear region and a staff of five certified counselors. First Baptist continues as a supportive partner of this ministry by providing financial support and board members.

The budget for 1992 exceeded five hundred thousand dollars, even though the church was in the midst of a capital campaign. The congregation met the challenge by giving beyond the goal and providing an additional three hundred thousand dollars toward the capital campaign.

First Baptist also recognized three of its most influential laymen by conferring upon them the distinction of "Deacon Emeritus." Wallace West, Ted Davis, Sr. and Waddell Corbett were recognized for the many years of service and commitment they rendered to the church.

After six years as Minister of Music, Jeff Lewis resigned on May 17, 1992, to return home to Baxley, Georgia.⁴⁰⁵ The Chancel choir, youth and children's choirs grew during Jeff's tenure. He was also responsible

for beginning three hand bell choirs, two ensembles, and the "Hanging of the Greens" service.

The Personnel Committee went to work aggressively seeking the next Minister of Music with the intent of securing another Organist/Choirmaster. After months of traveling, interviews, and auditioning Organists, Royce Angel, Donna Armstrong, Vicki Mincey, Dan Moore, Janet Nelson, and Jon Rosborough completed their task. On November 1, 1992, Rev. Kurt Wachtel began as the new Minister of Music.⁴⁰⁶ Kurt's wife, Jean, became the organist. It had been forty years since First Baptist had a Minister of Music that did not also serve as organist. Some members expressed concern about the change. There were some that were still grieving the resignation of Jeff Lewis. It would not take the doubters long to realize the gift First Baptist received when God led the Wachtel family to Wilmington.

Rev. Wachtel provided a fresh professionalism to the music ministry. The Ohio native and his family came to Wilmington from First Baptist Church in Monroe, Georgia. Like Dr. Queen, Rev. Wachtel spent a number of years working in the private sector before entering seminary. After graduating from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, the Wachtel's returned to Mrs. Wachtel's home state of Georgia where they served before accepting the call to Wilmington. During the last sixteen years, Kurt and Jean Wachtel have added to the overall ministry of First Baptist. In addition to directing the music ministry, Rev. Wachtel has also managed the maintenance and renovations of the church facilities. His keen management skills and eye for decorating have proven to be an essential part of his ministry. Mrs. Wachtel's gregarious personality creates a smile and ease for most people. Her ability to play the organ and piano in worship services is appreciated by all. For several years she served as an administrative secretary for the church. The Christmas concert in which Rev. Wachtel directs the sixty-voice choir and thirty-piece orchestra of First Baptist Church has become a tradition that is enjoyed by all of Wilmington. The Fourth of July patriotic celebrations, Thanksgiving Wildlife Banquets, and Easter resurrection worship services directed by Rev. Wachtel are enjoyed by all.

Kurt, Jean, Tyler, and Seth Wachtel arrived at First Baptist just as the church was moving back into the newly renovated sanctuary. The decorations at Christmas, 1992, made the old room come alive with its face lift. Part of the renovation actually restored portions of the building to its original look. Members who questioned the decision to make changes to

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the sacred space discovered how beautiful the building really was with the new carpet, fresh paint, and refinished pews and pulpit furniture.

First Baptist Church received new members almost every Sunday after completing the sanctuary renovations. The majority of new members were couples with school-aged children. With the growth experienced in the areas of children and youth ministries the congregation determined a new staff position was needed. Don Vigus was relieved of his responsibility to direct the recreation ministry when Gary Harris was hired as Director of Recreation in 1994. Rev. Vigus moved his office downtown and Mr. Harris began managing the Activities Center. Teenagers, Single Adults and Senior Adults now received Don's attention. The hours for the Director of Children's Ministries position were expanded to fifteen hours per week at this time. Mrs. Vicky Burrell assumed this leadership role from Sandy Rushing.

The church decided it needed to become incorporated in 1994. Under the guidance of John Smith, the trustees felt it prudent that the church protect itself from the prospect of a law suit. Unless incorporated, the members of the church could be assessed the balance of any judgment brought against the church that exceeds the assets of the church. The congregation agreed it was best that the church legally become a non-profit corporation.⁴⁰⁷

At the business conference in which the church voted to become incorporated, the congregation was informed of a gift left to the church by Josie Edwards and Mary Lathrop. These sisters were long-time members of the congregation who left the majority of their estate to the church they loved. The value of their estate was in excess of three hundred thousand dollars. First Baptist Church has been remembered by many people in many ways through wills and bequests; however, this was the largest monetary gift the church ever received.

A team of deacons who gave of themselves were also shown appreciation by the church before the year came to a close. Leon Brogden, Bert Blake, Harry Cherry, Fred Conner, Helen Dobson, Dr. Jimmy Smith, Curtis Elliott, Morris Powell, Sr., and Amos Wofford were all honored with the distinction of becoming Deacon Emeritus.

First Baptist was averaging more than four hundred people in Sunday School by the close of 1994. The budget had eclipsed six hundred thousand dollars. More than one hundred new members joined the church over the previous twelve months. First Baptist had not realized that many new members in almost forty years. A second worship serv-

ice that mirrored the traditional service was added in October to accommodate the increase in worship attendance. The new worship service was held on Sunday mornings at 8:45. Gifts to mission causes were in excess of one hundred thousand dollars for the first time. Under Dr. Queen's leadership the church was growing in nearly every aspect of its ministry. Increases in mission involvement by the membership and numerical increases in membership, attendance, finances, and mission giving created a new momentum for a church on the move.

Sunday School growth precipitated the congregation beginning to explore the possibility of purchasing the building beside of the church. Some Wilmingtonians called it the WLI (Wilmington Light Infantry) Building and others remembered it as "the old library," but in 1995, it was owned by the City of Wilmington and being used as office space. The seed had been planted in 1989, when members of the congregation held preliminary conversations with city leaders to express interest in purchasing the building. The church was renting rooms in the Bellamy Mansion to accommodate its expanding Sunday School. Classes were meeting in every available room in the educational building and the Sidbury House.

Negotiating the purchase of the WLI Building required creativity and negotiating savvy on the part of Carlton Fisher, Dr. Bertram Williams, Berry Trice, Dr. Mike Queen, Don Fallis, Lonnie Williams, Jr., Keith Stark, and others. On April 28, 1996, Dr. Bertram Williams, chairman of the diaconate, presented the proposal that First Baptist Church purchase the WLI Building from the City of Wilmington.⁴⁰⁸ The congregation voted in the affirmative to make the purchase, but there were still bridges to be built, and crossed before contracts could be signed.

First Baptist purchased two parcels of land in a newly annexed area of the city and traded them for the right to buy the building. Negotiations then began between the city, existing members of the Wilmington Light Infantry and the church. The final agreement came when First Baptist Church allowed the city to remain in the building through the end of 1996, without paying rent. The church also agreed to honor the City of Wilmington's long-standing agreement that allowed members of the WLI lifetime use of the basement of the building. Additionally, the church agreed to not alter the front facade of the building that contains two Civil War cannons and a medal plaque memorializing those members of the WLI who were killed when the *USS Maine* was attacked in February, 1898. It was an interesting transaction that Carlton Fisher says was truly a miracle from God.⁴⁰⁹ The church began using the build-

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ing for Sunday School classes in January of 1997, and moved its administrative offices to the first floor of the building, in January of 2003.

Another capital campaign was required in order for the congregation to pay for the indebtedness created by the purchase of the WLI Building. The addition to the downtown campus also created the opportunity to upgrade the educational building again. A connector building would be required to link the WLI Building to the existing educational space. With First Baptist Church becoming more involved in local mission projects, the expanded facilities could provide the church a means whereby the buildings would serve as a center for mission work in downtown Wilmington. The idea of the church becoming more intentional about being Christ in the center of the city created a new excitement for the membership as they planned for an upcoming three million dollar campaign.

Excitement turned to mourning, when on the evening of Thursday, September 5, 1996; Hurricane Fran paid a visit to Wilmington. Winds in excess of one hundred miles per hour left disaster in its path. The one hundred ninety-seven foot steeple that withstood the winds of many hurricanes, fell victim to Fran and lay as a pile of rubble in the middle of Market Street as the sun rose the next morning. News reporters from across the southeast converged on Wilmington. Almost one dozen trucks fitted with satellite dishes beamed pictures of the damaged building to viewers around the globe. The smell of heart pine wood filled the downtown air. Hundreds of people came from across the city to pick up one of the thousands of brick and pieces of timber and slate that littered better than a block of Market Street. Souvenir hunters were in paradise, while members of the congregation stood weeping. Members of the congregation gave their day to picking up pieces of the fallen steeple rather than cleaning up debris on their own property.

The gapping hole in the top of the downtown church made the building unsafe for worshippers, but two days later the First Baptist family gathered for worship at their Activities Center. Reporters and camera operators from across the country surrounded the congregation as Dr. Queen announced:

In a very real sense, the world looks in on us today. The world is fascinated by a steeple lying on the corner of Fifth and Market. The good news is the foundation of the church is still there. Is that not a parable of our own lives? As long as the

foundation of our faith is firm, we will rise up. We will rebuild to the glory of God. You can be sure of that.⁴¹⁰

After meeting away from the sanctuary for two weeks, the congregation began worshipping again at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. Yellow tape indicated parts of the interior of the sanctuary were danger zones for several months. Letters of encouragement with checks for as little as five dollars and as much as five thousand dollars came to the church from people across America who had seen the damaged sanctuary on national news. One letter with a check enclosed came from a lady in Homestead, Florida who said she remembered how the Wilmington church came to her aid after Hurricane Andrew, now she wanted to return the favor. A letter from Wilmington's First Presbyterian Church came with a financial gift and a note that read, "We now have the tallest steeple in the city, but only for a short while." Better than thirty thousand dollars was received for steeple repairs from interested parties who wanted the spire to stand again.

First Baptist did just what their pastor said they would. A Steeple Reconstruction committee made up of Bud Davis, Bobby Cox, Sam Bisette, Kit Austin, Kenny Smith and Dr. Bertram Williams was appointed to act on behalf of the church in planning for the reconstruction. Using photographs and designs of the original steeple, architects with Atkinson, Dyer and Watson in Charlotte, redesigned the steeple with engineering assistance from church members, Jeff Troutman, David Criser, and Bud Davis. Bobby Cox, another member of First Baptist, was asked to serve as general contractor for the rebuilding project. By March of 1998, the steeple was ready to be raised again. More than seventeen thousand pounds of weight was lifted in twenty foot sections to complete the project. The last section was put into place on October 13, 1998.

The first business conference of 1997 found First Baptist confident that its best days were before them. As the church planned for a new spire, Bob Parker and Mike Cockerham, chairmen of an upcoming capital campaign, brought a motion to enter into an agreement with Resource Services Incorporated to consult with them on the campaign.⁴¹¹ The congregation approved the motion, and ten months later pledged to give two million three hundred thousand dollars to pay the debt on the WLI Building, renovate it, renovate the existing educational building, and construct a new building that would connect the WLI Building to the educational building. The project would actually cost nearly three

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million dollars, and the congregation gave it all. The capital campaign was rightly named, "Heritage and Hope."

A second motion that was approved on January 12, 1997, was for the church to create a full-time position for a Minister of Children.⁴¹² Rev. Dena Rogers was called to fill that position on June 8, with additional responsibilities for congregational care. Two years later, Rev. Lin Carter replaced Rev. Rogers when he was called as Minister of Education and Children. Rev. Jim Everette's title was changed to Associate Pastor at that point. After Rev. Carter resigned in 2001, the church divided the responsibilities and created two part-time positions. Mrs. Jeannie Troutman became Director of Children's Ministries and Mrs. Jayne Davis began directing the Christian Education ministry. Both of these ladies were members of the church and had a passion for their respective areas of ministry.

Jeannie Troutman brought to her position intentionality and organizational skills along with a love for children and a desire to see them grow in their understanding of God's love. Jayne Davis was a divinity school student at Campbell University when she joined the staff of First Baptist Church. Her position was expanded to full-time during her final year at Campbell and upon completing her class work the congregation ordained her in 2004.

A third female member who was added to the First Baptist staff is Mrs. Charlotte Johnson. Like Jayne Davis, Jeannie Troutman, Kelly Reynolds, and Joe Sutton, Charlotte Johnson was hired from within the church family. She and her husband, Wayne, had been First Baptist members for a number of years. In 2002, the congregation determined they needed a staff person to coordinate the care for elderly members and to direct support group ministries. Mrs. Johnson was the perfect choice of the Personnel Committee as she had developed a great rapport with the homebound members and their care givers.

The third motion that carried on January 12, 1997 was that the church declared the next twelve months as "A Year of Prayer."⁴¹³ This may have been the most significant thing that happened that evening. A special emphasis was placed on the power of prayer in the life of First Baptist Church over the rest of the year. A series of sermons was delivered during January and February. Discipleship seminars were taught on Wednesday evenings. A prayer vigil was conducted during Holy Week. Sunday School lessons centered on prayer were prepared by a team of lay leaders. First Baptist became a church that rediscovered the importance

and power of prayer in 1997. Dr. Queen was the beneficiary of a good many prayers during the year. In addition to his pastoral responsibilities in Wilmington, he served as President of the General Board of the Baptist State Convention during a time when the conflict within the Southern Baptist Convention was roaring into North Carolina.

In 1998, the centennial anniversary of the Wilmington race riot of 1898 was celebrated. In recognition of its disappointment and sorrow for what occurred one hundred years earlier, First Baptist designated 1998 as the year of racial harmony. Three couples represented the church in a group of eighteen people from predominately black and white congregations that agreed to meet weekly for six months to address issues that caused racial separation in Wilmington. First Baptist also hosted a quarterly forum with African-American speakers who discussed similarities and differences in the two races. The pastor of the African-American First Baptist Church of Wilmington filled the pulpit at Fifth and Market one Sunday. An African-American professor, along with the gospel choir from Wake Forest University led in worship at First Baptist one Sunday. As in the previous year, a series of Sunday School lessons dealing with the annual theme was also developed by a team of lay leaders. The majority of classes utilized these lessons during the month of October.

A change in staff occurred when Gary Harris resigned as Activities Director. Mrs. Laurel Zitney followed Mr. Harris. Mrs. Zitney was trained in leading exercise groups and implemented a wellness plan as part of the athletic leagues and church wide outings that made up the majority of the calendar at the Activities Center. Recognizing the gifts Laurel brought to this arm of ministry, the Personnel Committee altered the job description to reflect the vitality of maintaining good health. The job title was changed to Director of Recreation and Wellness. Mrs. Zitney relocated from Wilmington two years later and Joe Sutton assumed the position. Joe was a thirty-year member of First Baptist who had recently retired from secular employment. As a respected leader of the church who spent a good deal of time at the Activities Center and had chaired numerous committees, including the diaconate, the decision to employ Mr. Sutton was a good one. Few people are more committed to First Baptist Church than Joe Sutton.

"Mission Possible" days became a regular part of the calendar and lifestyle of First Baptist members beginning in 1998. Two days a year were designated as days when church members committed to partici-

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pating in hands-on mission projects in the community. Two hundred members normally take part in these ministry days in addition to the many on-going projects First Baptist is about. Feeding the hungry, building houses for Habitat, doing yard work for the elderly, visiting the homebound and leading Bible clubs in housing projects are but a few of the activities that take place on these ministry days. A new emphasis was placed on the importance of doing mission work rather than just providing finances for others to provide missionary service. Though First Baptist was providing almost twenty-five percent of its overall gifts to mission causes, the time, energy and effort put forth by the congregation may have exceeded the monetary contributions. In addition to the positive difference the church was making in the city, their presence was being felt around the world.

First Baptist, opening its Activities Center as the southeastern North Carolina area's collection center for Samaritan's Purse's Operation Christmas Child ministry, closed out the year in 1998. Better than twenty-five thousand shoe box gifts were delivered to the Center where First Baptist members received them, boxed and labeled them, and loaded the cartons into cargo containers to be shipped to children in war-torn countries around the world. The church served as the collection center for the following nine years. The number of boxes received has grown to almost thirty-five thousand. First Baptist members normally contribute fifteen hundred shoe box gifts.

In addition to encouraging mission involvement as a lifestyle, Dr. Queen's pastorate has included a challenge for members to consider God's call to vocational ministry. As a result of his preaching, teaching, modeling and mentoring, twelve persons have pursued God's call to seminary, and five have been ordained to professional ministry by First Baptist during his twenty-one years as pastor.

The theme for 1999 was "Honoring Our Baptist Heritage." As in the last two years, a program of guest speakers, seminars and Sunday School lessons were planned and conducted. An important part of the history and heritage of First Baptist is its emphasis on starting new churches and that continued in 1999. Wrightsboro Baptist Church began North Wilmington Community Church in October of 1998, but additional financial support and people were needed in its early days. First Baptist contributed twenty thousand dollars over a three year period (1999–2002) and provided members to care for and teach children during Sunday School for the first twelve months. The first location where

the church met was at Eaton elementary school on Gordon road. They acquired a warehouse at the corner of Kerr Avenue and Blue Clay Road in 2003, but it needed to be renovated before being used as office space and a worship center. First Baptist provided teams of volunteers that assisted in the renovation.

The enlarged downtown campus created maintenance issues for First Baptist as each of its buildings was at least eighty years old. Renovations hid cosmetic scars, but in 1999, the church came to the realization that a facilities manager was needed in order for its buildings and vehicles to receive their required attention. Mr. Kelly Reynolds, a long-time member of the church who was considering retirement from his secular employment, was approached about accepting this new role. Mr. Reynolds was a deacon who gave many Saturdays to painting and small repairs at the church. It was a natural fit for the church to acquire his time, gifts and service for a people and place he loved. For the last nine years, the congregation has benefited from their decision to hire Kelly Reynolds as the manager of their facilities.

As the twentieth century came to a close, First Baptist expressed their thanks to a team of men who served as its guide through the ministry of being a deacon. Hyton Babson, Sam Bisette, Jack Davis, Percy Hedquist, Bill Hinton, Lonnie Williams, Sr., and Jim Fitzgerald received the honor of becoming Deacon Emeritus. The diaconate itself was enlarged from forty members to fifty-six because of additional responsibilities entailed as a result of continued numerical growth within the congregation. The resident membership stood at one thousand four hundred forty-four.⁴¹⁴ Six hundred seventy people gathered for worship and four hundred ninety in Sunday School each week. The proposed budget for 2000 exceeded one million dollars for the first time. Nearly two and one-half million dollars were given to support the ministry and capital campaign of the church. One hundred thirty-one new members were received in 1999. Dr. Jimmy Smith provided the gift of a new fifty-two passenger luxury bus to be used for mission trips and church sponsored outings. While the world prepared for the uncertainty of Y2K, First Baptist Church was planning and preparing for an exciting beginning to a new millennium.

A population that is sometimes over-looked in churches is those people who are developmentally disabled and have special needs. They, and their parents and care-givers, face challenges of which people are often unaware. In 2000, First Baptist put a spotlight on the needs of these in-

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dividuals and families by educating the congregation about the ministry opportunities that surround them. "The Year of Special Needs" included parents of exceptional children introducing themselves and their children to the church as a part of worship services. Parents educated the congregation by describing the difference in their life as a result of the challenges their children face everyday. They expressed appreciation for the love and support they received from the church and advised the membership of ways they could best minister to families different from their own. Seminars were planned throughout the year to give the church a new awareness of the blessing exceptional children provides. A support group for parents of exceptional children was begun and First Baptist made the commitment to becoming an ACCESS church whereby alterations would be made to the buildings so they would be accessible to people with physical disabilities.

Not only did the church commit to making adjustments to their buildings so access would not be denied to those with physical challenges, but First Baptist made their Activities Center accessible to another congregation in 2001. A fire destroyed the facilities of The Rock Church in the winter of 2000. With no place for the five hundred member church to meet for worship, leaders of the Pentecostal congregation approached First Baptist about allowing them to use the Activities Center on Sunday mornings. The deacons voted unanimously to allow The Rock use of the building.⁴¹⁵ The First Baptist Church gymnasium became an interim worship center for nearly two and one-half years while The Rock Church completed construction of their new building.

In February of 2001, First Baptist Church opened its doors to the hungry and homeless of Wilmington. Good Shepherd Ministries was in need of a temporary location to serve weekday lunches to approximately 200 guests. The ecumenical ministry was forced to relocate from its home at Church of the Good Shepherd until a new facility could be constructed. In an effort not to suspend their feeding ministry, Good Shepherd was seeking a partner who would provide a kitchen, dining room, and volunteers to staff the dining room. First Baptist stepped up with the facility and more than one hundred volunteers. When the soup kitchen moved to its new home, sixteen months later, many First Baptist members went with them to continue the service and relationships formed while hosting the ministry.

First Baptist Church kept hope alive for Good Shepherd and the guests who depend upon them for nutritional meals and a place to call

home. The opportunity to host this ministry did more for the church than for those who came for the food. Members who had never stepped out of their comfort zone to do mission work engaged in ministry in the comfortable confines of their church. After experiencing the blessing of feeding “the least of these” the members were ready to venture outside the walls of the church to share the love of Christ. This is something Bill Brooks, Dr. Andy Cracker, Bob Kennedy, Pat Warren, and Chester Jones did most of their life; and one of the reasons they became members of the Deacon Emeritus group in 2001.

Some people are near-sighted. They are the ones who operate out of fear rather than faith. Others are far-sighted. These people are visionary. From the day he arrived as pastor of the historic downtown church, Dr. Mike Queen dreamed great dreams of what First Baptist Church could become. By April of 2001, the trust level of the congregation was higher than it had ever been. At that point, Dr. Queen informed the diaconate that it was time for the congregation to begin working on a strategic plan to address growth issues and develop mission and vision statements to guide the church for the next ten years. Periodic plans were formulated and completed throughout Dr. Queen’s pastorate, but this one would be the most aggressive yet. With a vision for reaching unchurched people, the fifty-five-year-old pastor led the congregation to prepare the outline for the future of First Baptist Church.

After an October staff retreat, the diaconate, staff and congregation appointed a “Future Story Group” that was responsible for appointing five teams designated to develop a mission statement, vision statement, and appoint purpose teams to develop strategic plans for the church in the following areas: worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship and ministry (Appendix 20). The new vision included an aggressive and intentional effort to become more inclusive and evangelistic than the church had been in many years, maybe ever. The mission was to become and assist others to become “fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.” A church wide “Forty Days of Purpose” spiritual growth campaign fueled the enthusiasm of the congregation to look beyond itself and dream of whom, and what each individual, and First Baptist as a whole could become if they joined God in ministering in the heart of Wilmington.

Mrs. Sandy Smith’s devotional thought that opened a monthly meeting of the diaconate in April of 2003 emphasized Christ’s challenge to “Change the World.” The impact of the devotion created a ripple effect that energized the deacons and spilled over to the entire congregation.

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What began as a renewed interest in local mission action developed into waves of expansion and change in the overall ministry of First Baptist Church. The next five years would be filled with new ideas, new ministries, new buildings, new challenges and new members injecting new energy into the congregation that was already riding a wave of growth in all aspects of the church.

The church celebrated with its Associate Pastor as Jim Everette earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Baptist Theological Seminary, at Richmond, Virginia in May. Part of their affirmation for what the minister with a passion for mission work across the street and around the world had accomplished was to partner with other North Carolina Baptists by sending boxes of non-perishable food to starving people in Iraq. First Baptist lead all other churches by sending two hundred boxes of dry beans, rice, flour, sugar and other staples of a Middle-Eastern diet. Each box contained approximately sixty dollars worth of food. As with most other church-wide efforts, the contents of the boxes were purchased and donated from all segments of the congregation and packed by members of the Youth Group with notes detailing God's love for the recipients.

The fall of 2003 escorted in discussions to renovate and expand the church's Activities Center. It was decided that a three-phase approach to renovating the existing building and adding almost eleven thousand feet of space to the thirty year-old building should be executed but there would be plans to be made and money to be raised before the expansion could begin. The church was growing, but they were being cautious so as to make sure they did not overextend themselves. However, God was at work in the details being brought forth by committees of the church and it became obvious that the church was becoming unleashed in the personal discipleship of its members, its mission work outside itself and its ministry to one another.

In August of 2003, the church waded into a property expansion effort that became a public football that was fumbled back and forth between New Hanover County officials, private investors and trustees of First Baptist Church for two years. The New Hanover County Board of Commissioners accepted an offer from the church to purchase the building that formerly housed the New Hanover County Law Enforcement Center. The church offered to buy the fifty-nine thousand square foot building for one million dollars. Four members of the seven-member Board of Commissioners agreed to accept the offer. However, a few disgruntled

members of the community created chaos by claiming the deteriorating building was worth much more money than what the church offered and that the building should be made available for public auction. After two years of wrangling over whether the church had a binding contract with the county, First Baptist Church—with the devoted lay leadership of Carlton Fisher, Berry Trice, and Claude Arnold—became the official owners of the building on July 17, 2005. The building was renamed the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center in memory of the wife of Bobby Harrelson, a member of the church.

Mr. Harrelson requested a meeting over lunch with Mike Queen and Jim Everette, in May of 2005, to share his plan to give the church the one million dollars that was needed to purchase the Law Enforcement Center. He said he wanted to make the contribution in memory of his deceased wife of forty-five years because in her last days, she had expressed a deep desire that she and Mr. Harrelson play a significant role in helping the church purchase the building if the opportunity arose. Jo Ann Harrelson spent a good deal of her adult life serving others out of her commitment to Jesus Christ. Mr. Harrelson said, "This gift comes to First Baptist Church because of my love for Jo Ann and our shared interest in helping those less fortunate than ourselves."⁴¹⁶ With extensive repairs to the exterior of the building and renovations to the interior of the administrative side, the thirty year old former New Hanover County Law Enforcement Center and Jail was transformed from a center of incarceration to a building used for Christian humanitarian purposes. The church voted to establish the building as a non-profit corporation with its own nine-member Board of Directors and leased the building to the Board for one dollar a year for at least twenty years. The Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center is now home to the administrative offices of Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity; Campus Crusade for Christ; Communities in Schools; Wilmington Youth Center for Inspiration, Recreation and Education; Phoenix Employment Ministry; Southeastern Sickle Cell Association; and other ministry organizations that offer hope and healing to many people. The purchase of the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center also provided a parking garage that gave the church an additional seventy-nine parking spaces for the better than nine hundred people that were gathering at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street to worship each Sunday.

Strategies generated by the purpose teams of 2001 were implemented beginning in 2004 with the most obvious ones being the start of a new

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church, the launching of another capital campaign, and a change in the number of worship services offered at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street on Sunday mornings.

The year began with Mrs. Jayne Davis being ordained as a minister. She was the first female ordained by the church as a minister in better than twenty years. Reverend Davis was serving the congregation as Director of Christian Education at the time of her ordination. Her title was changed immediately to Minister of Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development. Her passion to assist others in discovering their spiritual gifts and utilizing their gifts to grow in their relationship with Christ and serve others made her a vital part of the spiritual and numerical growth of the congregation.

First Baptist was blessed to add Dr. Frank Hawkins to its ministerial staff a few months later. Dr. Hawkins and his wife, Pat, relocated to Wilmington to live near their daughter and her family after retiring from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Kingsport, Tennessee. His years of experience as a pastor and missionary to Brazil equipped Dr. Hawkins with a wealth of wisdom that the congregation and pastors of First Baptist Church saw as a great asset for their church. His pulpit presence, teaching ability and counseling skill was first-rate and the church took advantage of the opportunity that God offered. Dr. Hawkins was asked to serve as a permanent part-time member of the ministerial staff as Minister of Pastoral Care filling the role previously served by Mrs. Charlotte Johnson. His responsibilities included visiting homebound members, filling the pulpit occasionally, officiating for weddings and funerals, providing counsel to members as needed and leading discipleship seminars and Sunday School classes. Dr. Hawkins had a winsome personality, loving spirit and willingness to serve when ever called upon. He proved to be a vital piece of the pastoral team of the church.

Three months later, First Baptist partnered with Winter Park Baptist and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, in starting a new church across the Cape Fear River. North Brunswick Fellowship Church was launched at Belville elementary school in April of 2004, with twenty-seven charter members; twenty from First Baptist. The husband and wife team of Rob and Mickie Norman were called to serve as Co-pastors of the fledgling congregation. The church was unashamedly Baptist but chose not to include the word "Baptist" in its name because one of the goals of the church was to reach out to

new residents of northern Brunswick County and there was the thought that the word “Baptist” may keep some people from attending. Many of the new homeowners that were relocating to the Cape Fear region were migrating from the northeastern United States where there are few Baptist churches. What began as a small group of committed believers has grown to an average attendance of approximately sixty-five persons as the church approaches its fifth anniversary.

A capital campaign called “Promise and Purpose: Being Christ in the Heart of Our City” was also launched by the mother church in April of 2004. Two of the most respected members of the church—Berry Trice and Dr. Bertram Williams—co-chaired the campaign to provide the majority of the money needed to renovate and expand the existing Activities Center. The congregation pledged \$2.9 million and gave better than \$3 million over the next four years. Still, in order for the plans for the new Activities Center to become a reality, even more money would be needed. The money came to the church through one of its most generous members but it was not until his death that the gift was realized.

Dr. Jimmy Smith died in February of 2005, at the age of ninety-eight. He had been a member of First Baptist Church for eighty-eight years; longer than anyone ever had. Dr. Smith executed a Last Will and Testament, in September of 2002, when he was ninety-five-years-old. First Baptist Church was named as the primary beneficiary of his estate because Dr. Smith’s wife of better than fifty years, Iris, had died in December of 2001 and the couple’s only child, James A. Smith, had died in April of 2002 leaving Dr. Smith as the lasting survivor of his immediate family. Extended family members of Dr. Smith challenged his will by filing a caveat contesting its validity on the grounds that Dr. Smith was incapable of executing a will at age ninety-seven because he was not of sound mind. However, in April of 2006, after weeks of testimony from dozens of witnesses in a court of law, an agreement was made between First Baptist Church, family members of Dr. Smith and care givers of the elderly dentist. The portion of Dr. Smith’s estate that was realized by the church was in excess of four million dollars after all property was sold and liquidated into cash. This is the largest gift ever made to First Baptist Church. The majority of the assets the church received from the estate were used toward the expansion and renovation of the Activities Center.

September 11 is a significant date in the history of First Baptist Church but even more so in the history of our nation. September 11,

2001 is a day that Americans will never forget. The September 11, 2001 attacks (often referred to as 9/11) were a series of coordinated suicide attacks by Islamic Extremists (al-Qaeda) upon the United States.

On that morning, nineteen terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger jet airliners. The hijackers intentionally crashed two of the airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, one plane into each tower, resulting in the collapse of both buildings soon afterward and extensive damage to nearby buildings. The hijackers crashed a third airliner into the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. Passengers and members of the flight crew on the fourth aircraft attempted to retake control of their plane from the hijackers; that plane crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania. Aside from the hijackers, 2,974 people died as an immediate result of the attacks. A few weeks later our nation entered into a war in Iraq that continues to this day.

September 11, 2005 was the day that First Baptist expanded from two worship services that mirrored each other to three services that were very different in the hope of reaching out to unchurched people across the greater Wilmington area.

The traditional service at 11:00 a.m. remained as it had for many years. However, a new service at 8:00 a.m. that included serving communion each week was begun in the Chapel. The service did not offer a choir or anthem and lasted approximately forty minutes. The hope was that the intimacy of meeting in the Chapel would make this worship experience appealing to an average of eighty worshippers weekly. In reality, the service was attended fairly well from the beginning but attendance began to wane after a year so the service was discontinued at the end of 2007 with an average attendance of thirty.

One of the more radical moves the church has ever taken was the new 9:00 a.m. worship service. The service was held in the one hundred thirty-four year-old sanctuary but featured drama, film-clips shown on plasma television screens, casual dressed worshippers and worship leaders, and a band and contemporary praise music rather than a choir singing traditional hymns. Lead by Rev. Kurt Wachtel, the band and singers brought a new enthusiasm to the up-beat worship services. The same sermon was preached in each of the three worship services but the varied components of each service made them different. The projection of the ministerial staff and study team was that the progressive worship service would appeal to a younger group of people. However, the service

was attended by people from across generational lines from the first service and this has continued to be the case. The average worship attendance was greater than what was expected from the beginning and continued to increase to the point that there are as many people who worship at 9:00 a.m. as there are at 11:00 a.m. on any given Sunday. The expansion of the worship options meant an average increase of approximately two hundred worshippers each week.

The annual business meeting of 2006, held on January 15, was a celebration of the many accomplishments by the congregation, over the previous twelve months. As was always the case at the annual meeting, the Activities Center was filled with people—young and old—and applause followed the reports from each standing committee of the church but the loudest applause came with a recommendation from the chairpersons of the diaconate, trustees and Financial Management. These three people represented the unanimous support of the members of each of these ministries that the church begin renovating and expanding the Activities Center. Ballard Architects was selected to design the new building and contracts were signed with McKinley Building Corporation to erect the new structure. Rick Miley served as chairman of the committee responsible for overseeing the tumultuous project that took nearly two years to complete. With the capable and generous leadership of numerous members of the congregation, two phases of a three phase plan to renovate and expand the Activities Center were finished. As with all ministries of the church, the First Baptist family stepped up with many members playing significant roles in seeing the project thru. Donations of time, material, expertise, labor and love were needed and given along the way and prayers were lifted daily for the builders and those that would be ministered to by the opening of the new center for recreation, fellowship, evangelism, discipleship, wellness, and worship for people of all ages.

As ground was being broken for the new Activities Center, the visionary pastor recognized that the greatest challenge for First Baptist Church was not to build and pay for a new building but to meet the needs of future generations. He knew that it would take all the leadership qualities God had given him to continue steering the church in the right direction. At the March meeting of the diaconate, Dr. Queen shared four goals he had set for the church.

The first goal was to prepare ready and willing leaders to do whatever needed to be done, with God's grace, to move the church through

the 21st Century. The second goal was to continue dreaming with the leadership of the church such that they would not lose their sense of mission and vision. The third goal was to work with the Financial Management Committee to assure that the church would remain on a solid financial foundation. And, the fourth goal was to lead the church to pay off any indebtedness for its downtown buildings, the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center and the Activities Center and keep the physical plant of First Baptist Church in first class shape with no major maintenance issues. Members of the diaconate embraced these goals as their own and committed to work beside their pastor in keeping these goals before the congregation as a whole.

Goals three and four are much easier to measure than the first two of Dr. Queen's goals so it was decided that a new vehicle would need to be designed to assist in preparing the congregation and keeping it accountable to the first two goals. A Strategic Planning Team, made up of thirty-six members of the church, was appointed by the ministerial staff and Mark Hamlet (Diaconate chair) in 2007, to work with the ministers to develop strategies for making First Baptist a missional church, as it strived to meet the goals Dr. Queen had set. The team adopted the theme "Shaped By God's Heart: Being Changed, Changing the World" because they believed this was the calling of God upon their lives and the life of First Baptist Church from its earliest days. Team members discerned God's desire for the church is to develop a deeper, more authentic relationship with God grounded in prayer, the study of scripture, and expressed by an external transformation in the way they live out God's love. This happens when church members encounter God's holiness in worship, deepen their pursuit of knowing God by becoming intentional about their personal devotional life, and expect God to change them and change the world by every member of the church recognizing their call to be a minister. This is a gargantuan task that will be constantly evolving and changing as each member grows in their relationship with Christ, and each other, and new members join the church.

The annual business conference for 2007 was preempted by the ribbon-cutting for the newly expanded and renovated Activities Center on January 6, 2008. It was a day of celebration with better than six hundred members and friends of First Baptist taking part in presentations and prayers of thanksgiving for all that God has done in and through the first Baptists of Wilmington over the last 200 years. Rev. Daryl Trexler was introduced as the new Minister of Administration and Senior Adults.

Mr. Chad Long was presented keys to the new building as he came to be the Director of Recreation. The church reveled in the way God had blessed it with more than two thousand three hundred members, over one million eight hundred thousand dollars given to support the mission and ministry budget of the church in 2007, over four million dollars received in designated and undesignated offerings, and better than two hundred thousand dollars given to mission causes in the previous twelve months.

Tours of the new building that Rev. Jayne Davis referred to as “the front door of First Baptist Church” were given. The beautiful new building houses a state-of-the-art weekday pre-school, kitchen, bookstore, game room with the latest technology, meeting rooms, conference rooms, dressing rooms, and space for meditation and reflection for individuals and groups to complement the existing gymnasium. The cost of the new construction and renovations exceeded the three million dollars the church had committed for the project but three special gifts from the estates of deceased members allowed for phases one and two to be completed.

The estate gifts of Dr. Jimmy Smith, Vallance, Virginia and Vernell DeVane, and Helen Fussell provided the extra money needed to see the expanded Activities Center become a reality. The extreme generosity of Dr. Smith and the DeVane sisters was recognized by the church when they named the largest meeting room on the first floor of the Activities Center Smith Hall and the entire second floor the DeVane Conference Center. Many more days of celebration will take place in the year to come as the church prepares for its two hundredth anniversary.

Though the original house of worship lies but a few blocks from the place First Baptist worships in 2008, the church is a long way from where it started. Still, voices from the past continue echoing in the present as God’s spirit stirs the hearts and minds of those that occupy the pulpit and the pews of First Baptist Church. The membership is much larger, the buildings are bigger, the budget is greater and the ministries are more diverse than ever before, but the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina is as it always has been—its greatest asset lies not in the size of its congregation, budget, or appearance of its facilities but in the heart and action of its people as they continue to become and help others to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. May it always be so to the glory of God.

Epilogue

From the fragile founding days of First Baptist Church, to the opening of 2008, the mission of the church has been to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ by providing a living witness of God's grace. The means by which they have attempted to accomplish this mission is by offering hope to those in despair, love to the undesirable, and God's grace to the undeserving. There has been a deepening concern for destitute, despised, hungry, innocent children and elderly who are robbed of every vestige of normal life. The church has dealt vigorously and courageously with many of the moral and social challenges of every generation.

Singer/songwriter, Bernice Johnson Reagan instructed, "If, in moving through your life, you find yourself lost, go back to the last place where you knew who you were, and what you were doing, and start from there."⁴¹⁷ First Baptist Church has faced many challenges and temptations over the last two hundred years. Yet, in the midst of these trials, it has remained loyal to its founding principles by glancing back over its shoulder occasionally at its heritage while yearning for the hope in its future. Rather than allowing its vision to become blurred by voices of despair, First Baptist has resisted leaving its first love and remained committed to its tradition.

In managing conflict, celebrating victories, supporting each other and loving its neighbors, First Baptist Church has had as its constant companion the hope and assurance that in Jesus Christ there is always a glorious future toward which believers can press onward with renewed faith and confidence. Envisioning the future is no small task, but First Baptist Church is confident that the Spirit of God will lead them to the best that is yet to be. Regardless of the challenges that lie ahead, First Baptist Church has high aspirations for its future because of the rich inheritance of its past. The first Baptists in Wilmington were a people of hope and those that make up First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, two hundred years later, carry with them the heritage of that hope.

Appendices

Appendix One

Original Church Constitution

We whose names are hereunto subscribed, being now assembled in the Baptist Meeting House in the Town of Wilmington, N.C., and being Baptized on a profession of repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ do hereby on this the thirteenth of April in the Year of our Lord, One Thousand Eight Hundred and thirty-three, most solemnly agree among ourselves to become a regular independent constituted Church of our Lord, do now give ourselves to each other and request our brethren in the Christian ministry who are now present with us to witness this our solemn engagement to admonish us with respect to our duties and privileges in this the second relation, and commend us to God and the word of his grace which is able to build us up and to give us an inheritance among all them that are Sanctified.

Original Church Covenant

For as much as it has pleased God Almighty to turn us from darkness to light and to unite us in one Body by the Blood of the Cross; For as much as in his providence he has fixed the bounds of our habitation, that our local relations to each other invites us to unite together for our mutual benefit, and for the advancement of his cause; we therefore unitedly give up ourselves to the Lord and to one another according to his will, in church fellowship. We do covenant and agree to take the Bible and the Bible only, as the most clear comprehensive and perfect rule, in Doctrinal, Experimental and Practical Religion, as the most safe and only infallible Rule by which to regulate our principles, tempers and whole behavior. We agree next to the honor and glory of God that we will seek the welfare of the Church of our Saviour; and particularly that branch of it to which we ourselves belong. That we will pray for the peace of Jerusalem, that peace may be within her walls and prosperity within her

palaces; we will not forsake the assembling of our selves together, nor grow sleep nor slumber to our eyes to the neglect of the sacred place where two or three meet together to pray and read and sing in the name of the Lord. We will love the place where his honor dwelleth and will never forsake the houses of his abode. We will submit to the order and discipline of the Church according to the doctrine Example, and admonitions of our Lord, Ambassadors or Apostles to the Church in pure and primitive times. We will employ our talents and our substances according to our ability for the benefit of the Church with which we are covenanted for the cause of God in general. We will regard the Table of the Lord as sacred to the memory of his unmerited love, his painful and accursed death and his atoning sacrifice for a lost world. We will regard it to provoke one another to love and to good work. In dependence upon divine aid we resolve and agree to love one another in the Lord; to follow after things that make for our peace, and whereby one may edify or build up another, to speak no evil one of another, to watch over one another, not from evil surmisings, but from faithful affection, from Christian love, not to find fault, not to wound but heal, not to kill but to cure, to reprove if need be in the most tender manner with the sole view of alluring the mind to right reflections and of regaining the heart to its first love; to correct public transgressions only with public rebuke; to observe most cautiously, and most unfailingly for all private and personal offenses the rule given in Matthew 18; 15-17 verses which rule every member of a gospel church ought by memory to know; to avoid all tattling, tale bearing, whispering, backbiting, and publishing the faults of each other or surmising evil; thus happily evincing to the world, that we are a bond of brothers, and that we stand fast in the spirit; and with one mind striving together for the Faith of the gospel and that a constituted Church of Christ "is a garden enclosed, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." To this Covenant and agreement in dependence on divine aid we subscribe our unworthy names.

Appendix Two

To the Churches of the Chowan Association

Dear Brethren and Sisters:

It is my intention to visit as many of you as I possibly can during the ensuing summer. My object in visiting you is three fold—to renew old acquaintances, to form new ones, and to plead with you for aid to assist us in building a house for the Lord. You were kind enough at your late Association to allow me to explain my object before your body, for which I sincerely thank you. I am glad that some of my ministering brethren, and others who are not ministers, are acquainted with our present condition here.

We are compelled to build and to purchase a lot in another part of the town. Our plan to raise the means to build, was first to subscribe to the utmost of our ability before we asked any one out of our church for a dollar. Then we appealed to the citizens of Wilmington. Now we think this course will commend itself to every man. After having done all this, we find ourselves unable to complete the house without aid from our brethren. We are determined not to have a debt hanging over us after the house is finished. We have struggled hard here to build up a strong and efficient church.

There is a noble band of brethren and sisters here who are willing to make any sacrifice and perform any labor necessary to accomplish the work. The ladies gave one thousand dollars, the proceeds of their working society. We have never asked for help before, and we think we shall never ask again. Will you not then brethren, sisters and friends, help us this once? Then we will help you when you need our help. Now, dear brethren, will you prayerfully ask yourselves how much you will give us, and have it ready for me? I can only make this one journey. My object will not be to obtain subscriptions, as it will take more time than we can spare to make a second visit to collect. We are now ready to begin the work, and shall need the money very soon. Hoping to see you soon.

I am sincerely your brother and fellow-laborer,

J.L. Prichard

Appendix Three

Resolution honoring the memory of Rev. John Lamb Prichard

Whereas it pleased Almighty God since our last church meeting to remove by death from among us, our highly esteemed and beloved brother and pastor, Elder John L. Prichard, we feel that as a church our affection for him should lead us to give some expression of our sentiments on this occasion.

Resolved First, that we declare his settlement among us as peculiarly providential; and his qualifications both of raised intellect and heart, rendered him eminently fitted for the work before him to which he addressed himself with an untiring energy, laboring night and day for the welfare of the church and the up building of the cause of Christ in this community;

Resolved Second, that during a pastorate of about seven years, he did not fail to declare the whole counsel of God, and his labors were greatly blessed in the promotion of harmony in the church and in the valuable accessions to our body; and in his demise we feel that while the denomination will sustain a heavy loss, to us it will be irreparable;

Resolved Third, that as a Christian gentleman, by his exemplary and deep loved piety, and practice of manners, he has endeared himself not only to the church which he served, but to the members of other denominations and to the community generally;

Resolved Fourth, that the course pursued by him since the commencement of our national troubles, was beyond all praise. He was ever to be found among the most zealous in laboring for our brave soldiers; his heart was ever ready to advise and his hand to execute liberal things in their behalf, and many will remember with heartfelt gratitude, his labors of love in the camps, in the hospitals, and the kindness received from him in their sickness at his own house;

Resolved Fifth, that his memory will long be cherished, not only by the members of this church, but by many others who were the recipients of his attention and kindness amid the prevalence of the dreadful scourge that visited our town during the past summer. Although frequently urged

to leave, his universal reply was, "The poor need my assistance and I must remain and do what I can." Thus he lived for the good of mankind and when danger threatened he faltered not, but like a true soldier of the cross, he stood firm and died at his post, died a martyr in the cause of humanity;

Resolved Sixth, that in his removal we would humbly recognize the hand of God, and in this sad hour of our bereavement we would humbly and solemnly bow before God, acknowledging that while He does not willingly afflict His servants, yet "He doeth all things well," and we will pray for grace to enable us from the heart to say, "Not my will but thine, O God, be done.

Resolved Seventh, that we extend our cordial sympathy to his bereaved wife and family and would commend them to Him who has promised to be a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless;

Resolved Eighth, that these resolutions be spread upon our church book and a copy sent to the family of the deceased. Also, that copies be sent to the *Biblical Recorder* and *Religious Herald* for publication.

Appendix Four

Letter of October 20, 1867

Dear Brother Young,

Simply to accept your resignation without giving expression to our feelings of sorrow and deep regret that you are to go in and out amongst us no longer would but misrepresent us, for our hearts yearn towards you and our prayers do follow you for good. We feel that your ministry here has been a blessing to the church and its influence felt in the community at large, and by these you are respected and beloved for your high-toned character both privately and officially. We feel that we are as a church to be deprived of a wise and able Christian Counselor, that in our Sabbath School, Youth Missionary Society, and in all the various branches of usefulness connected with this church, we have lost a most zealous and ardent supporter, and that we cannot but deplore the necessity that occasions your removal from us.

In conclusion, we earnestly pray that our God may abundantly bless

you and your companion in your new field of labor and keep you both under his tender care and mercy, and when life's toils and cares shall end on earth, may you and yours together with the members of this and every other Church of Christ be gathered around the throne of God in Heaven where partings shall be no more.

The *Wilmington Journal* reported on November 1, 1867:

According to announcement, Rev. William M. Young delivered his farewell sermon in the City Hall, Sunday night last. The capacious hall was crowded to its utmost extent. The assemblage was composed not only of the members of his own church and congregation proper, but of the many friends of Rev. Mr. Young who have been attached to him during his stay in our midst,...in consideration for his gentlemanly qualifications, and the encouragement which he has given to all literary and public enterprises which had for their object the benefit of the people.

During the delivery of this sermon and farewell address, many were affected to tears. The church accepted the resignation of Rev. Mr. Young reluctantly, and deeply regretted to part with his services. As a gentleman and a scholar, the whole community will lose in his departure one whom they greatly esteem, and who is of much practical benefit to them. We, ourselves, greatly regret his departure, and ere he takes his leave, trust to have the melancholy satisfaction of bidding him a personal farewell.

Appendix Five

Song of celebration written by Rev. James Taylor

With grateful hearts we meet this day,
For we have rolled the load away
Which on us, long has pressed.
Our earnest prayers have now been heard,
For we believed the Heavenly Word,
And God our efforts blest.

Yes, He has smiled upon our aim
And to our succor surely came,

True to his promise given;
 Oh, may we trust Him more and more,
 Until our earthly lives are o'er,
 And we are safe in heaven.

Come and adore our glorious Lord,
 And let us speak His praise abroad,
 For all His wondrous love;
 We'll sound aloud His saving grace,
 And urge the lost to seek God's face,
 And live with Him above.

God give us love and burning zeal,
 To us His glorious truth reveal,
 And we shall faithful prove.
 May many now without, soon come
 That they may seek the heavenly home,
 And taste redeeming love.

Then let us tell to all around
 That mercy free doth now abound,
 That Christ will give them rest.
 Yes, brethren, let us earnest be.
 For soon we'll reach Eternity,
 And be forever blest.

Appendix Six

Resolution in appreciation for the ministry of Rev. James Taylor

In the loss of Brother Taylor, our church will part with an able, pious and faithful minister, whose daily walk and conversation in our midst has impressed its do for good, not only on his immediate flock, but upon city and state. In hours of sickness and death he has been an ever-faithful and tender friend and brother, and has presented to us the assuring consolations of the word of life with love and gentleness. He has officiated at the marriages of many of us; he has led many of us down to the watery grave, and there buried us by baptism into the likeness of the death and resur-

rection of our Lord; he has committed to the earth the bodies of many whose memory is to us a sweet savor; he has led many of us to the Fountain of Life, of which if a man drink he shall never thirst. In many other ways our pastor has ably and faithfully ministered to us in spiritual things, and therefore our hearts are knit to his in the love of Christ.

When we consider the result of our pastor's labors, we feel that the Lord hath bountifully blessed his work in our midst. No feuds exist to mar the beauty of holiness. Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. The financial condition of the church has never been better. Under Brother Taylor's administration the entire debt, amounting to over eleven thousand dollars, which for years has been a grievous burden, has been paid off. The current expenses of the church are regularly discharged, and there are no stumbling blocks to retard its progress. God be praised!

We notice with great pleasure in our pastor's letter of resignation that he expects to visit Europe, and congratulate our brother on the prospect before him. We do sincerely invoke God's blessing upon himself and his family, and an abundant harvest of souls for him in his future work.

Appendix Seven

Resolution in appreciation for Benjamin Mitchell

God has taken from among us our loved and honored brother B.F. Mitchell, who was our senior deacon and one of the oldest members of our church, who had for many years gone in and out among us, an example to all who would lead a Christian life.

His life was marked by a loyalty to the interests of his church, and strict adherence to the principles that mark the upright man, and a devotion to his family. The poor blessed his name both for his own giving and his consistent remembrance of their needs. The members of his church loved him and felt his presence among them as a benediction.

His household mourns his loss as a tender father and honored patriarch. We the members of his church so desire to express our belief that

we have enjoyed a blessing in having his life and labors cast among us, and the desire to return thanks to our Heavenly Father, that he has given us this example of a high Christian life. We would point his relatives to that source of comfort that faileth not, believing that if they submissively accept this loss, the unction of the Holy Spirit will fill their hearts.

When the pure and upright man departs this life in his ripened years a gracious influence extends from his life, over the community where he lived; it is with him whose loss we now deplore. While we mourn we are conscious that our own lives are made better by the remembrance of his.

We resolve that the clerk tender this expression of our feelings to Brother Mitchell's family as a token of our sympathy with theirs, and as evidence that we believe God's Spirit dwells with our brother.

Appendix Eight

Excerpt from the memoirs of Dr. J.H. Foster

We had a fine Sunday School auditorium with a large gallery about the top and class rooms around the back and sides of the lower floor. We needed more class rooms. With an excavation of two or three feet under the Sunday School auditorium we would have space for twelve class rooms and a large Primary room. The times were hard. We did not want to borrow money, so we decided to do the work ourselves. Every afternoon at six p.m., a number of the men met and worked until ten p.m., digging and wheel barrowing the dirt out. We had carpenters, and brick masons, and plumbers, electricians, and business men—all giving their time. Deacon John Hanby said, "There is a lumber man that owes me a considerable sum. If he would be willing to pay that debt in lumber, I will be glad to donate the lumber to the church." That is what happened.

When the lumber arrived, I went down and paid the freight bill. The clerk got interested in what we were doing. I told him that our members were doing all the work, and all the lumber and hardware had been donated. He went to see some official and when he came back he said, "The railroad wishes to pay the freight bill for the lumber. Neil McEachern's

drays hauled the lumber to the church. Finally all the work on the class rooms was finished except the painting.

On Sunday morning I announced the completion of the work with this exception. After the service, Dan Penton came to me and said, "Get all the paint you need and charge it to me and also get whatever paint brushes you will have to buy." A few days later I visited Charlie Mitchell who was arranging to go to Baltimore for an operation. He asked me how we were getting along with our work at the church. I told him we had finished the twelve class rooms and now only lacked a Primary room. He said, "How much will it cost to build it?" I said, "The excavation is already done. It will cost about five hundred dollars." He said, "When I return from the hospital I want to talk to you some more about that Primary room." A few days later I went with his friends and loved ones to the station and from there to the cemetery to bury his body next to the grave of his father. About a week later I received a call and was told, "Your church has been left a legacy." "How much?" I asked, "And who has remembered us?" "There was a codicil in Charlie Mitchell's will, leaving five hundred dollars to the church for the building of a Primary room." He had evidently felt that he would not come back alive, so he made sure the church would get that amount by adding it to his will.

Appendix Nine

Excerpt from the memoirs of Dr. J.H. Foster

The baptistery of the church gave us some trouble. Mr. LeMoyne, a skilled carpenter and something of a genius, had, some years before, so arranged the covering to the baptistery that when it came time to move the pulpit, the pastor took his seat, touched a button, and slowly and noiselessly the preacher, chair, and pulpit were all pulled back into the hall between the two dressing rooms; and the baptistery was made ready for use. Sometimes this didn't work satisfactorily. One Sunday night it got caught just half-way back. The pastor said, "Now the Devil is in the pool." Two or three of the deacons and brother LeMoyne came forward to help remove the Devil or overpower him, but they could not budge the platform; and the baptism had to be postponed.

It had become a very awkward affair before I came to Wilmington. At

a deacons' meeting we discussed changing the arrangement. Brother John Hanby said, "My brother and I want the privilege of putting in a new baptistery as a memorial to our father and mother." This was done, and we discarded the black robes we formerly had used, wearing white ones instead. We thus sought to place emphasis on the idea of the resurrection.

Appendix Ten

Resolution honoring Dr. Joshua Hill Foster

Since it has pleased our Heavenly father to call to other spheres of usefulness our beloved and esteemed Pastor, Dr. J.H. Foster, who will on June 1, 1915, go from among us to take up his duties as President of Bessie Tift College—a college for Baptist young women—at Forsyth, Georgia, and

Whereas, during the five and one-half years of his pastorate among us he has greatly endeared himself to the membership of this church, having by precept and example, through the grace of God, greatly increased its number and stimulated its faith in the Divine plan of the church as the instrument for the salvation of souls, through Christ and by the favor of God, and

Whereas, he taught a theology as pure as the water from some mountain-top, he was never one to shamble away from the tests of the laboratory but measured up to those scholarly heights which fitted him to meet and supply to his theology the known truths of science; always seeking to impress upon his auditors the goodness of God in the orderly unfolding of His plan, and

Whereas by reason of extensive travel, thoughtful observation and much study he has acquired a broad culture, confirmed in faith in Jesus Christ, which should peculiarly fit him for the task he is called to undertake, namely that of training the young womanhood of our southland in the essential things which go to produce the true refinements of human life; in which he will have the invaluable assistance of his most excellent wife, and

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Whereas, as an organizer his resourceful mind materially aided in adding to this church those adjuncts of a Christian temple which are felt by their influence in many needy places near and far; bearing in mind, as he always did, the missionary spirit of his church, and the Savior's injunction: "While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light." (John 2:36).

Now, therefore, be it Resolved,

First—That the membership of this church do part with our friend and Pastor, Dr. J.H. Foster, and his good wife and family, with many regrets.

Second—That they go from among us with the prayers of this congregation for the blessings of God to attend their further efforts in the Kingdom of Christ.

Third—That in the loss sustained by this church, we feel that the Bessie Tift College will gain the services of a most able, cultured and scholarly exponent, who come from a family of instructors well known among the faculties of our colleges in the South, and who will be largely strengthened in his labors by a most consecrated and capable helpmeet.

Therefore, we do release him and bid him Godspeed in the good fight, which he has elected to continue in a new field.

Appendix Eleven

Resolution of Commitment dated November 4, 1931

WHEREAS, the entire world is passing through a critical period such as never before experienced with such suffering and anxiety in mind and soul; and,

WHEREAS, we know both from the teachings of our Bible and from personal experience that the greatest need of every soul is salvation from sin and new birth into the Kingdom of God; and,

WHEREAS, the present world crisis has been brought on because of the sin of the people and can be relieved only by a turning to God in repentance, thus making the Gospel the supreme need of the hour for all the world; and,

WHEREAS, the condition and need of the world give to the churches their greatest opportunity for the fulfillment of their divine mission of spreading the Gospel to all the world; and,

THEREFORE, be it resolved by the Finance and Promotion Committees of the First Baptist Church in joint session, Monday night, October 26, 1931;

First, that instead of letting down in our work for the Kingdom interests during the coming year—which is the natural human tendency in times of depression—we increase and intensify our efforts, and thus manifest the real spirit of our Master who “came not to be served, but to serve”;

Secondly, that we urge EVERY MEMBER of our church not to decrease his, or her, contributions to the church, but, if at all possible to increase them, so that the Lord may be glorified in this needy day by His work going forward even at a sacrifice;

Thirdly, that we recommend the tithe as a minimum for every member of the church, and that the whole tithe at least to be paid through the church as God’s “storehouse”;

Fourthly, that the total of our budget for 1932 be \$25,000, the same as for this year, and be divided the same as this year, with such adjustments as are necessary, \$15,000 for current expenses, and \$10,000 for missions and benevolences;

Fifthly, that these resolutions be read and recommended to the church for its action.

Appendix Twelve

Resolutions in memory of Dr. J. Marcus Kester passed by the Wilmington Baptist Minister's Conference, April 13, 1936

When God called home Dr. John Marcus Kester, He took from the Baptist ministry one of the finest equipped men, intellectually and spiritually.

Few men have accomplished more and, at the time of his going away, he was at the height of his power as a force for righteousness in his church and community.

As a man there was about him the charm of simplicity, genuineness and reality. He maintained a quiet dignity and poise which commanded the respect and consideration of all with whom he had dealings. He was humble almost to the point of self-depreciation, but his convictions of right and duty imbued him with conscious power.

As a pastor, he was a sympathetic friend, a wise counselor; tender and loving. His visits and his prayers were a benediction to the sick and afflicted.

As a preacher, his ability and culture were unquestioned. He was a Biblical scholar with profound convictions and, while he was sincerely loyal to the Baptist faith, he entered into no controversy and, without compromise, won the love and esteem of members of all denominations and races.

He lived his religion, and his most effectual piece of his sermon was he himself. He never resorted to the spectacular nor the sensational, never sought the limelight; but, in all denominational work, his brethren, recognizing his ability, placed him in positions of honor calling for wisdom and self-sacrifice.

His presence and wise counsel will be sorely missed in our pastor's conference, in our Associational and Convention assemblies, and in the denominational boards.

In our deep bereavement, we offer the following resolutions:

Recognizing the wisdom and goodness of God, we bow in submission to His will, knowing that He cannot err.

To the bereaved wife, children, to the brothers and sisters, we extend our sincerest sympathy, and pray that the God whom he served so faithfully may bless and keep those whom he loved.

Appendix Thirteen

Letter from Dr. Sankey Blanton to Mrs. J. Marcus Kester

My Dear Mrs. Kester:

We are leaving for North Carolina early in the morning. Lillian will probably bring Truett home on Saturday. I had expected to come but find that it will not be possible for me to do so, unless I run down for a day next week. We have greatly enjoyed having your boy with us and we hope he will reach you in good health. I think the summer has been good for him.

In planning to take up my work there on the fifteenth of September, we are beginning to think about the details of moving. Since the call from the church included the parsonage, I presume that I would have the authority to say for you to continue in it, say for a year so that you would have ample time to reach a decision as to your permanent plans. If it were your preference to rent another house instead, I would be glad to pay the rent for the year. I want you to feel free to do whatever you think best. We are planning to rent a home if you desire to remain in the parsonage.

I need not remind you that I am anxious to help you find the right solution to your problem.

Yours sincerely,

Sankey Lee Blanton

Appendix Fourteen

Statement of thanksgiving for the life of Daniel Penton

We, the members of the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, by this means humbly pay loving tribute to Mr. Daniel H. Penton, our staunch and loyal brother whom God has called to His eternal home; his death occurring at his home, number 220 North Third Street, in Wilmington, North Carolina, Sunday, March 12, 1939.

His was a life so nobly lived that it was a blessing, not only to those of us who were privileged to be associated with him in Church membership, but also those of the community, the state, and beyond.

Mr. Penton was a man of strong conviction without ostentation, and of sound judgment and discretion. He had a sympathetic understanding that enriched his personality and made for him many warm and appreciative friends. He was honest, unselfish, and straight-forward in dealing with his fellowmen. His advice and views on matters pertaining to the church have been priceless value to us.

We shall miss his friendly presence, his wise counsel, and his untiring efforts to promote the Kingdom of God. May his example ever inspire us to be better Stewards of the manifold graces of our Lord.

Appendix Fifteen

Statement of thanksgiving for the life of Dr. W.T. Smith

Dr. Smith, in his quiet, unassuming manner, consecrated his life to Christian service through his church, community, and his profession. For one-half century he was a member of the First Baptist Church and faithfully, spiritually, intellectually, and interestingly taught a Sunday School class of men he organized forty-five years ago which honors his name today, casts its light as a lamp from a hilltop to all those who were and are privileged to observe. His influence through those he served stands out as a guiding star for Christian living. His memorial is neither found in himself nor the class but in the lives and hearts of those he

touched. His life could be characterized by continued faithful and humble service in his church, home, and community for his unselfishness, loyalty, and devotion. While his life was an inspiration to those who knew him to live nobly, and his presence among us will be no more, we, the deacons, members, and friends of the First Baptist Church, deeply mourn his passing, do resolve:

That we express our deepest sympathy to the family and the bereaved ones.

That we assure all the members of the family of our prayers and continued thoughts of them.

That a copy be sent to the Smith Memorial Bible class wishing the men omnipotent power individually that will cause them to bring men into the Kingdom's work.

Appendix Sixteen

***Kingdom News* article from Rev. Randolph Gregory following the business conference of October 8, 1969**

Now is the time for us all to roll up our sleeves and get to work. The heads of the various church organizations have been called together and challenged to prepare a five year program of church renewal and advance. More of our people have been talking about the church in recent weeks than has taken place in a number of years. Now let us match our talking with some good solid work. I must commend everyone who was present at the business meeting on October 8. J.G. Middleton presided in a masterful style. I was proud of the marvelous Christian spirit and love between the brethren which was evident throughout all of the discussions. It was a great demonstration of the power of the love of Christ. Naturally everyone wasn't satisfied with the way the votes turned out, but everyone can be justly proud that he is a member of a congregation which can discuss a touchy subject and at the same time display love for the brethren. We must strive to make the immediate years ahead some of the finest years in the long and glorious history of the First Baptist Church. God has a work for us to do. Let us do it with a fresh awareness of the importance of the whole Christian mission.

Appendix Seventeen

Report of the Church Goals and Objectives Committee presented on April 4, 1973

The mission of the First Baptist Church is to serve the congregation and the community in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is to be accomplished by the utmost utilization of all church properties and programs. Where, how, and when can this mission best be fulfilled? We will attempt to answer this question by submitting for your consideration this proposed plan of action in two stages to accomplish the mission:

To utilize in the immediate future the Independence Boulevard property by constructing a building for the purpose of housing and promoting an evangelistic and activities program. This building should include the following facilities: one large all-purpose area for assemblies, dining, basketball, roller skating, etc. Adjacent rooms for smaller activities should include kindergarten, kitchen, library, arts and craft, music, etc.

Through the usage of this building, it is recommended that all existing church related programs be enriched and updated and that introduction of new and more meaningful programs be introduced for persons of all ages in the congregation.

Through the usage of this building, we recommend that we revitalize the evangelistic ministry of the First Baptist Church in order that we may touch and reach more individuals in this community.

The second stage, to follow as soon as possible, should include the construction of an educational building and sanctuary on the Independence Boulevard property.

The committee also strongly recommends that the present sanctuary be retained as a historical memorial to the dedicated membership who built this original edifice and to the continuing membership who have preserved it for posterity.

If the report of this committee is approved by the church membership, it is recommended that a committee be created to implement these recommendations immediately.

Appendix Eighteen

Letter of resignation/retirement from Rev. Randolph Gregory

There is a time for everything...for this purpose I have come to this hour. Time marches on and each man must march with it. Come July 13, 1975, time will mark my sixty-fifth birthday; therefore, I hereby tender my resignation to be effective August 31, 1975. You are a great people to work with. My family has been raised in this church. Our girls were baptized and married here. No one else will ever take the special place you hold in my heart and in the heart of my good wife, faithful companion, and co-worker. We shall ever remember you with love and abiding Christian affection. The happiest years of our lives have been spent working with you to advance the cause of Jesus Christ. 'Twill be twenty-four years and four months. What a blessing! This letter of resignation is closed with the confidence that as time and circumstances separate us here, Christ will join us together again in the land beyond the western sky.

Appendix Nineteen

Statement of appreciation for the life of Gilliam Horton

Gilliam was a hard-working deacon. It was never his weakness to quit before a job was completed, and he always, along the way, lent encouragement to others.

He was a cooperative deacon. In this day and age when petty opinion too frequently assumes dominance, how reassuring it is to feel an underlying spirit of tolerance and a willingness to work as a team, not as an individual!

He was a friendly deacon—friendly to all—old, young, rich, poor, happy, sad—always ready to listen and to give a cheering smile.

He was a dedicated deacon. As a deacon he participated in the larger program of the church; he was active in Sunday School class activities, choir and music department activities, and committee work as he was called on to serve.

He was a laughing deacon. In his quiet, unassuming manner Gilliam's good humor permeated his life. The twinkle in his eye, the broadening smile, and sometimes the infectious chuckle many time made days brighter for the rest of us.

As current members of the diaconate, we are truly grateful for what Gilliam's influence has meant in the life of our church.

Appendix Twenty

Mission, Vision and Core Values of First Baptist Church, 2001

Standing on the shoulders of those who have come before us, and believing that the best is yet to be for our congregation, we the members of First Baptist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina, commit to living out the following:

Our Mission: To honor God by becoming and helping others to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Our Vision: To become a community of believers that is open and welcoming to anyone, no matter where they are on their faith journey, and is intentionally joining with Christ in his redemptive work and purposes in the world.

Our Core Values: We are intentional in our efforts to be ...

BIBLICAL - We believe the Bible is true and that its teaching is the catalyst for life-change in an individual's life and in the church. (2 Timothy 3:16-17; James 1:22-25; Hebrews 4:12; Acts 20:32)

EVANGELISTIC - We believe unchurched people matter to God, and therefore ought to matter to the church. (Luke 5:30-32; Luke 15; Matthew 18:14)

RELEVANT - We believe the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally sound. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

TRANSFORMATIONAL - We believe followers of Jesus should live au-

thentic Christian lives and strive for continuous spiritual growth. (Ephesians 4:25-26 & 32; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 12:1)

PURPOSEFUL - We believe the church is a unified community of servants, each one exercising their unique spiritual gifts, and structured according to the nature and mission of the church. (Romans 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12 & 14; I Peter 4:10, I Peter 5; Acts 6:2-5)

LOVING - We believe loving relationships should permeate every aspect of church life. (1 Corinthians 13)

RELATIONAL - We believe life-change happens best through relationships. (Acts 2:44-47)

EXCELLENT - We believe excellence honors God and inspires people. (Philippians 3:12-16; Colossians 3:17; Proverbs 27:17)

SPIRITUAL - We believe the pursuit of full devotion to Christ and His cause is expected of every believer. (Philippians 2:1-11)

FREE – We believe in religious liberty for all people, the separation of church and state, and the autonomy of the local church. (Galatians 5:1; Matthew 22:21)

Appendix Twenty-One

Pastors of First Baptist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina

John Larkins and Rev. Peter Smyth	1808
Rev. Simon Sellers, Rev. Rueben Everitt and Rev. Peter Smyth	1809–1824
Rev. Jonathan Bryan	1824–1825
Rev. Jacob C. Grigg	1833
Rev. W.J. Findley (Interim)	1834
Rev. A. W. Chambliss	1835–1836
Rev. Alphonse Paul Repiton	1839
Rev. Amos Johnston Battle	1842

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Rev. Alphonse Paul Repiton	1843
Dr. James McDaniel	1844–1852
Rev. W.H. Jordan	1852–1855
Rev. John Lamb Prichard	1856–1862
Rev. Alphonse Paul Repiton	1862–1864
Rev. William H. Young	1864–1867
Rev. J.C. Hiden	1868–1875
Rev. James B. Taylor	1875–1883
Dr. Thomas Henderson Pritchard	1883–1893
Dr. William Benjamin Oliver	1893–1898
Dr. Calvin S. Blackwell	1898–1903
Dr. Fred Hale	1904–1909
Dr. Joshua Hill Foster, Jr.	1909–1915
Rev. Marshall Craig (Interim)	1915–1916
Dr. John Jeter Hurt	1916–1923
Rev. D.H. Wilcox (Interim)	1923–1924
Rev. J. Marcus Kester	1924–1936
Dr. Sankey Lee Blanton	1936–1946
Rev. Charles A. Maddry	1946–1950
Dr. O.L. Powers (Interim)	1950–1951
Rev. Randolph Gregory	1951–1975
Rev. Allen Laymon	1975–1985
Rev. Randolph Gregory (Interim)	1985–1986
Dr. Michael Glenn Queen	1986–present

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Peggy George, Wilmington, N.C., 2 March, 2004.

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A Heritage of Hope

A History of First Baptist Church

Wilmington, North Carolina

1808-2008

How challenging it is that on certain occasions we are reminded of our integral part in so vast a program as the promulgation of Christ's kingdom here on earth; how humble we feel in the face of the heritage that is ours; how determined we become at that moment to fulfill in every way possible our little part of the whole. We are a part of the continuous outpouring of the Holy Spirit which has marked the life of this church since its inception. We have been blessed to be a people who by dependence on Divine leadership have moved through the course of time (two hundred years) fraught with vicissitudes of fortune to this present hour. May we catch by this general regime of the church's history something of that same spirit inculcated so strongly in our forefathers (and foremothers), that we, like them, may preserve and pass to our followers this, our sacred trust.

—Helen Dobson



About the Author

Jim Everette has served as Associate Pastor of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, for the past 18 years. He is a graduate of Pembroke State University (B.A., 1981), Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M. Div., 1984), and Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (D. Min., 2004). Jim is a native of Fayetteville, North Carolina where he met his wife of twenty-five years, Lisa. They are the proud parents of Jonathan and Megan.



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